Babble and Speak: A Review of Sure Start
Alumwell/Plek Speech and Language Support Project. Final Report

April 2004

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Contents

1. Introduction 3

2. Collecting the evidence 4

3. Definitions used in the report 4

4. Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start - Facts and Figures 5

5. Background to the development of the speech and language project 9

6. How effective has the project been in improving and promoting access to the service among families registered with Sure Start? 13

7. What progress have the staff made in meeting the projects targets? 19

8. What difference has the extra funding from Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start made to lives of children referred to the service and their families? 25

9. Summary of key report findings 27

10. Recommendations 28
1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to review the progress made by the Speech and Language Therapy project in meeting its original targets. The report highlights the key strengths and weakness of the project and also makes a number of recommendations for future action.

What is the structure of the report?

The first sections of the report describe the background to the development of the project, in particular the issues that influenced its design and delivery. The remainder of the report focuses on answering the following key questions:

a) How effective has the SLTS project been in improving and promoting access to the service among families registered with Sure Start?

b) What progress has the project made in meeting its targets?

c) What difference has the extra funding from Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start made to lives of children referred to the service and their families?

I would like to thank all the staff from the speech and language service for their support and contributions.

I would also like to thank all the parents from Hillary Street and Alumwell Language groups for sharing their experiences of the project with me.

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28/04/2004
2. Collecting the evidence

The evidence for the review was collected between December 2003 and March 2004. Evidence was collected using a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods. A list of the methods used is given below:

d) 3 telephone interviews with parents who had gone to earlier language group sessions.
e) 10 semi-structured interviews with parents at Hillary Street and Alumwell Schools Language Group.
f) 3 participatory appraisal sessions with parents at Alumwell School Language Group.
g) A joint focus group and participatory appraisal session with the senior speech and language therapists and the generalist speech and language therapists involved in the project.
h) Analysis of relevant project documents
i) Review of published projects reports and research findings which have focused on the speech and language delays of children under 4. This is defined as ‘delays which cannot be attributed to other conditions such as hearing loss or other more general developmental disabilities’ such as autism or cerebral palsy.
j) 4 informal interviews with staff involved in managing or delivering the projects at language group sessions at Alumwell and Hillary Street Schools

3. Definitions used in the report

A key aim of the project has been to identify and support children under 4 years living in the Sure Start area with language difficulties. The term ‘language’ refers to the understanding and use of words, phrases and sentences by children.

4. Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start – Facts and Figures

Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start is a round 5 programme. The members of the Sure Start team had registered 276 children by February 2004, of the 623 children under 4 years who were estimated to live in the area. A breakdown of children registered with Sure Start based on their ages is given below:

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1 Screening for speech and language delay: a systematic review of the literature. J.Law et al. Health Technology Assessment, 1998; Vol 2: No. 9. Executive Summary
The largest population groups for both areas are British White (Alumwell 68% (3457) and Pleck 53% (2874)). The area covered by Sure Start is a mixed multi-ethnic community representing a number of different groups - see chart below:
A breakdown of the ethnic groups in origin of children registered with Sure Start is given below:

Ethnic origin of children registered with Sure Start
April 2003 - December 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Bangladeshi</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed White/Black Caribbean</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed White/Asian</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Black/African</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Pakistani</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Pakistani</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sure Start Alumwell and Pleck database.

The ethnic origin of children referred to the project is not generally collected by staff. Project staff record information on the languages spoken in the household when children are referred to them.

The main languages spoken by children seen by Alumwell/Pleck Early Identification Group.
April - December 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarati</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirpuri</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urdu</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Speech and Language Therapy Department
The information collected on languages spoken in the household children will be useful in helping to check how well the project is meeting the needs of particular minority groups and also which needs are not being met.

According to Sure Start records there are only 2 children under 4 years on the special educational needs register. Project staff are working with the Special Educational Needs service to provide specialist support to children referred to them, who have learning or language difficulties.

**How is the project funded?**

Sure Start Alumwell/Pleck contributes jointly with other Sure Start programmes to a central budget. The budget is managed by the Speech and Language Therapy Service. **Alumwell/Pleck’s share of the total budget for 2003/04 is £31,284.** The budget is ‘ring fenced’ and is only used for meet the targets in the project plan and wider aims of the programme.

**How is budget used to meet the needs of local children?**

The budget from Alumwell Sure Start has been used to employ extra speech and language therapist staff on temporary contracts. This arrangement has enabled more experienced members of the current speech and language service to work on the project. This arrangement has avoided the problem experienced by other programmes in trying to recruit and retain new staff with the range of specialist skills needed to deliver the project.

The project has benefited from having experienced, appropriately trained staff who know the area and who have been able to make good progress in establishing a new service very quickly. Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start has a separate service level agreement with the early years special educational needs team. The budget of £11,000 (2003/04) is used to fund work which supports the aims of the project.

The budget from Alumwell/Plek Sure Start part funds the following posts:

![Organizational Chart]

- Manager: Linda Bromwich
- Admin Support
- Senior Speech and Language Therapist: Helen Fegan & Libby
- Generalist Speech and Language Therapist: Pippa & Caroline
- Bi-Lingual Workers: Amber/Alean/Kalpama
The project staff provide dedicated support on a sessional basis to Alumwell/Pleck families. The number of sessions vary from 1.5 to 5 sessions a week depending on the post. A “session” is equal to 3.5 hours a week. The project staff provide similar support to other Sure Start programmes.

**What support is available to children referred to the project?**

Children referred to the project are offered a mix of support from the project team depending on their needs. A list of the support available to children is given below:

1. Direct therapy via the language groups
2. Individual therapy
3. Case review to check progress
4. Advice to teaching staff/parents/appropriate other agencies
5. Parent toddler group experience

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### 5. Background to the development of speech and language project

The progress of any project is shaped by national and local factors. This part of the report lists the main issues that have shaped the development of the speech and language project.

**National issues that have influenced the design and delivery of the project**

At the national level all Sure Start programmes are expected to meet the following objective and related Public Service Target.

**Objective 3: Improving children’s ability to learn**

**PSA Target:** To achieve by 2004 for children aged 0-3 in Sure Start areas, a reduction of 5% in the number of children with speech and language problems requiring specialist intervention by the age of 4.

The evidence from project documents and interviews with project staff suggests a clear understanding about the role of the project in meeting this national target. The design of the project has also been influenced by the experience of other programmes elsewhere that have used similar methods to identify and support children with language difficulties. The project will be directly affected from April 2004 by a new national PSA target which all programmes are expected to meet by March 2006.
The Government expects local programmes to achieve an "\[X\] per cent increase in the proportion of children having normal levels of communication, language and literacy at the end of the Foundation Stage and a \[y\] per cent increase in the proportion of young children with satisfactory speech and language development at age 2 years."

The activities detailed in the three year service delivery plan for the project will need to be updated to meet the Government’s new objectives for all Sure Start programmes. It is important that when setting new targets the project continues to meet the local needs and priorities of children living in the area.

Local issues that have influenced the design and delivery of the project

At the local level the design and delivery of the project has been influenced by the following issues:

- The large number of bi-lingual children living in Alumwell/Pleck area.

There is a specific reference in the project proposal about developing the role of Bilingual Speech and Language Therapy Assistants to "ensure equity and enable assessment and treatment in the first language spoken (where necessary) – Speech and Language Therapy Proposal (Revised) 2003 to meet the needs of bi-lingual children.

A recent report\(^2\) by the Sure Start Unit on the language skills of two year old children living in Sure Start areas shows the importance of focusing on the needs of children who are either bi-lingual or non-English speaking. A key finding in the report was that children in these categories had a lower word count score when compared with English speaking children.

The project’s use of bi-lingual workers during the initial interviews with parents has been very effective in dealing with any concerns they may have had about the service, and also in strengthening links generally between the speech and language service and the local community.

- The need to deliver an effective service which meets the needs of Sure Start programmes

The evidence from a review of project documents listed below shows a focus locally on delivering an effective service to all Sure Start programmes; while meeting the specific needs of children living in the Alumwell/Pleck area:

a) Walsall Community Health Trust, Speech and Language Therapy Department, Sure Start.

b) Service Delivery Plan, Sure Start Alumwell/Pleck

c) Sure Start Alumwell/Pleck Programme, Speech and Language Therapy Proposal

The documents are based on examples of good practice and detail a clear process for identifying and meeting the needs of children referred to the service. A common theme in all three documents has been the importance given to developing the structures needed to meet the longer terms of the project.

- The need to meet the targets in the service delivery plan.

The targets in the service delivery plan, (Box 1), have shaped and directed the work of the project. There a specific number of activities which are linked to the targets, which the project is, expected to achieve during its lifetime.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1: Targets for speech and language project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Early identification and intervention based on the development and implementation of a locally designed screening programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Early prevention by increasing parental awareness and involvement to encourage language development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Language intervention groups to be implemented jointly with the Pre-school teaching service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Development of the role of bi-lingual speech and language therapy assistants to ensure equity and enable assessment and treatment in the first language spoken (where necessary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Training for all early years' practitioners to further develop strategies for identification of and support for children with delayed speech and/or language skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Service Delivery Plan, Sure Start Alumwell/Pleck

A major weakness in all three project documents is the lack of any reference to specific outcome based targets which either describe what contribution the project will make towards meeting the PSA target or the change the project will deliver to children or parents in the following areas:

- **Knowledge** - increasing knowledge on a particular subject
- **Attitudes** - create an attitude that favours a desired behaviour
- **Skills** - developing individual capacity to adopt a given behaviour
- **Behaviour** - maintaining or adopting a particular behaviour

The targets describe "activities" e.g. *early identification and intervention based on the development and implementation of locally designed screening programme* rather than "objectives". An objective is defined as a specific measurable statement of desired changes that the project intends to accomplish by a given time.

A clear set of project objectives will provide a basis for judging the contribution that the project is likely to make towards identifying and meeting the language needs of children referred to the project during the lifetime of the project.
A clear set of objectives will also help staff and key stakeholders to properly monitor the progress and performance of the project and ensure that the necessary changes are made to meet the ongoing needs of local children.

A further weakness in the design and development stages of the project has been the limited role that parents and the Sure Start programme managers have had in this process. The evidence from an earlier study\(^3\) shows the value of service providers involving relevant groups in the project planning stages.

The involvement of parents and members of the project team in this process will increase the chances of the project being able to meet the needs of local children and also encourage the move from a professional led service provision, to a more child centered provision of service.

The evidence from the project documentation suggests that more work needs to be done to involve these two groups in helping to agree what the key issues or problems are and in developing solutions that meet the needs of local children. It is important that parents and the members of the Sure Start team are given the support and encouragement they need to become active in planning the future work of the project.

Project staff have made a good start identifying risks to the success of the project. The next step in this process will be to prioritise these risks and then to develop plans to reduce likely impact on the future success of the project.

6. **How effective has the SLTS project been in improving and promoting access to the service among families registered with Sure Start?**

The evidence from project staff and parents suggests that the project has been effective in improving and promoting access to the service. The extra funding from Sure Start has increased the number of places that parents can get help or talk to staff from the project.

In addition to the clinic session supported by the team at Brace Street Health Centre and Alumwell Infants in-school clinic, parents can now speak to members of the project team at anyone of the following places:

- Alumwell Primary School Language Group
- Hillary Primary School Language Group
- St. John’s Mother & Toddler Group
- Babble Group and Cradle Club at Pleck Library
- Talking Tots drop-ins at Alumwell and Hillary Street Schools

Project staff visits to drop-in sessions at different places have been successful in helping to build a relationship with parents, particularly those parents who are new

\(^3\) Judith Keech and Sue Wilks, *Integrating Action Locally - A toolkit for Partnerships*, 2002
to the service. A key factor in the success of these visits has been the focus on staff taking time to build a relationship with parents over several weeks through regular visits, rather than one-off visits. The visits to different venues has given parents a chance to talk informally to staff about their concerns.

The evidence from staff suggests these visits are beginning to change the way parents talk to their children. The informal visits is likely to lead to a reduction in the number of referrals to the service in the future as staff are able to intervene much earlier, with less intensive support needed to help children with their language problems. There is evidence from project staff that parents are becoming more aware that the way they talk to their children can directly affect their language development and behaviour.

The response from parents has been positive with a number now feeling confident enough to make their own referrals to the service. The use of local venues by project staff has also helped to challenge the general assumptions in the community that:

- the service is only for children with severe language problems
- the stigma that is sometimes given to children or parents who use the service.

The use of bi-lingual workers has been an important factor in promoting the project in different groups and the service more generally.

The bi-lingual service has 6 workers to support the speech and language service for the whole borough. Two members of the bi-lingual service team are on maternity leave and another member has reduced her hours. In addition to the problem of staff shortages, project staff has spoken about the issues of:

- Parents not coming to the session as planned, when a bi-lingual worker has been booked for them.
- Parents coming to a session who were not expected and where no bi-lingual worker has been booked.

The situation will hopefully improve as the numbers of parents coming to the group sessions who need interpreting support increases in the future.

The feedback from parents and project staff indicate that improvements to the rooms used by the language groups will also help to further promote the image of the service locally and encourage more parents to come – see Box 2 for details of the main concerns of parents and staff about the rooms used for group sessions.
The suggested changes will help create a more welcoming and stimulating setting, particularly for new children who have been referred to the groups. The improvements in the facilities will hopefully encourage more parents to use the service in the future.

A key success in promoting the service has been the establishment of the language groups at Alumwell Primary Schools (October 2003) and Hillary Street Primary Schools (29.4.03) and the Early Identification Groups (2.5.03.) The Early Identification Groups are held at Alumwell Primary and Hillary Street Schools.

The language group sessions are held in the mornings. The language groups consist of six sessions, usually held in the school term. The sessions are based on a set of structured activities linked to a number of different topics - see list below:

- Week 1 - Everyday Objects
- Week 2 - Food
- Week 3 - Body Parts
- Week 4 - Clothes
- Week 5 - Animals
- Week 6 - Transport

The use of school sites has helped to improve the links between the staff involved and project staff by improving understanding about the role of the service, and the support available to children and parents.

The number of Sure Start registered children coming to the language and early identification groups, while low, has generally been consistent. It has taken time for staff to build relationships with the community.

Box 2 - What's wrong with the facilities in the rooms used by project staff?

- The lack of separate storage space for equipment used during language group. As a result staff have to spend time preparing and clearing the room at the start and end of the language group sessions.
- No permanent space in the rooms that can be used to display information about the service or children's art work.
- The lack of proper heating and hot water in both rooms for the children.
- The staff have no access to a phone or photocopier at either building.
- No space in the room to have private meetings with parents.
- Poor ramp access to the portacabins room at Alumwell School for parents with buggies.
An analysis of the attendance at Hillary Street language group shows a gradual increase in the number of children attending the groups.

![Graph showing attendance at Hillary Street School Language Group sessions from April 2003 to December 2003.](image)

The numbers of parents coming to the groups has been affected by religious festivals such as Eid and Ramadan during November and December 2003.

Project staff have responded to the low numbers by referring non-Sure Start children to the groups. The inclusion of non-Sure Start children in the groups has become more important, as the attendance by Sure Start children varies from session to session. The removal of non-Sure Start children may mean that the language groups will not be able to continue in the future.

The project staff have made a number of changes to the structure of the groups in response to concerns identified by parents about early start of sessions and the length and frequency of the sessions. For example, the staff are planning to merge two separate morning sessions to give parents more time to talk to staff about their individual concerns.

**What impact has the project had on the number of referrals to the project?**

The number of referrals to the project is an important measure of the success of the project in promoting and improving access to the service. There is some evidence of an increase in the number of referrals since the start of the project. However, the numbers of referrals to the speech and language service is still small.

Sure Start children are seen by staff within six weeks of getting the referral. The six week period is not a target. In the past children would have had to wait several weeks before being seen by staff in the project team.

The total number of referrals to the speech and language service increased from **14** (April 2002 - December 2002) to **23** (April 2003 - December 2003). The average number of monthly referrals to the speech and language service was **2**.
The project have produced clear guidance to parents and staff from other agencies on:

- the referral criteria
- the benefits of early referral

The guidance is expected to lead to an increase in the number of referrals to the project as staff become more aware of the project. Project staff are also expecting an increase in referrals to the project when training for health visitors, Sure Start staff and other staff working with Sure Start children is completed.

There is evidence that this process is working. The number of referrals from Sure Start staff to the project increased from 8 in 2002 to 24 in 2003.

Project staff recognise the problem of low numbers and have identified a number of changes that could be made to increase both attendance and the number of referrals to the project - see list below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project staff ideas for increasing the number of referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Put an information leaflet about the project in the Baby Bag given to expectant mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Talk to parents who have been involved in the project if they would like to be a contact for other parents who may be unsure about contacting the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Follow-up clients by telephone who don’t come to meetings as planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Offer parent reward stamps for coming to the sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ask Sure Start to contact parents who don’t come to sessions as planned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quality of referrals received by the members of the assessment team has been good. The feedback from staff in the assessment team indicate that the project has started to raise awareness among staff and parents in local playgroups and schools about the importance of identifying children with language problems earlier, and more generally about the support available to families from the service.

There is no evidence at this point to suggest a shift in the source of referrals to the project from Health Visitors to other staff working with young children.

A review of the source of referrals (Box 3) to the project from April 2002 - November 2003 show that majority of referrals 21 (54%) continue to come from health visitors.
Box 3: Where are the referrals to the project coming from?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of referral</th>
<th>Number of referrals</th>
<th>Percentage of total referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Visitors</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.P</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatrician</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumwell Infants</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Primary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other schools</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At present there is no reliable information on the number of children with language problems living in the area that could be used to provide a guide about how well the project is meeting the need for language support among local families.

It was originally planned that health visitors would use the screening tool developed by speech and language service, to identify children at 8 months and 18 months for "potential communication difficulties." There was an expectation that this screening process would lead more referrals to the project.

The shortage of health visiting staff across the borough has meant that they have not been asked to screen children at this stage. The lack of a baseline measure means that it is hard to estimate the number of children with language difficulties living in the Alumwell/Pleck area.

The evidence from detailed review4 of published reports highlights the problem in getting a reliable estimate of the number of children with speech and/or language delays. The estimates from different studies vary from 0.6% to 33.2% of children up to 16 years with speech and/or language delays.

The evidence from parents interviewed show a high level of satisfaction with the work being done to promote the service among local families; particularly among families who in the past would not have considered using the service. The majority of parents interviewed would recommend the project to other parents.

A majority of the parents interviewed have also spoken about the friendly and relaxed atmosphere in the language groups created by staff.

*If you needed to talk to Pippa or Debbie about any problem then you could talk them and they would listen and sort it out for the next session.* - Sure Start Parent

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In conclusion, the evidence suggests that project staff have been successful in getting new and existing users to take advantage of the opportunity to access the service. Project staff are aware of the issue of low numbers of children coming to the group and are developing new ideas to tackle it.

## 7. What progress have the staff made in meeting the projects targets?

The evidence from project staff show that **92%** (11) of the original targets or milestones in the delivery plan had either been met fully or partly by March 2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project milestones met</th>
<th>Project milestones partly met</th>
<th>Project milestones not yet met</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment of project staff</td>
<td>Develop joint initiative with library service</td>
<td>Collation of SSLM - this is will be done by 31st March 2004.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of resources</td>
<td>Develop joint training programme with Ethnic Minority Advisory Group (EMAG)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of information for parents</td>
<td>Plan health promotion programme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of language groups and the early identification group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train co-workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training for SSLM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of screening programme tool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop training programme</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key Successes - what has worked well?

1. **Establishment of language groups and early identification group**

The project staff have established parent weekly language groups at Hillary Street and Alumwell Primary Schools and an early identification group. Both groups run for 6 sessions. The staff are very enthusiastic and work hard to create a positive and supportive environment for the children. The majority of parents are happy to take part in the craft activities.

Parents have the choice of coming to two morning sessions between 9.30- 11.30. The sessions are very structured and follow a set programme of activities. The sessions
are changed to meet the needs of the children. The staff actively encourage parents to join in with the activities with their children. The staff regularly ask parents for views about the groups through a questionnaire given at the end of the 6 week session.

A sample of photographs from Alumwell and Hillary Street Language Groups sessions.

Parents were asked during visits what changes they would like see in the way groups were run. A key concern among parents interviewed at Alumwell and Hillary Street language was lack of time available in the groups for individual work with children.

A number of parents also said that they wanted either more language group session during the week or longer sessions.

![Larger time, more time to have a play and learn, time too short- Sure Start Parent](image)

The staff have responded to these concerns by merging the two morning group sessions. This change is expected to give staff more time to talk to parents/children and respond to any individual concerns they may have. The change will also give staff more time to record their notes of their observations of children.

As stated earlier in this report the response from parents who have been to the groups has been very positive. The majority of parents said that their original expectations of the groups had been met.

![He has improved, can’t stop him talking, he is saying more words, in the past all he would say was “noo noo”. He learns more with other children, he listens. He has tantrums, but he has got better since coming to the group. - Sure Start Parent](image)

Parents were asked to give examples of changes in a number of specific areas e.g. play, listening/attention skills they had seen in their children as a result of coming to the language group.
Parent comments about the changes they have seen in their child suggest that the sessions have made a real difference to the lives of the children involved:

**Parent Quotes**

- "plays a lot nicer at the group"
- "sits down and listens when asked to and understands no!"
- "will wait and listen before giving a reply"
- "looks at me when talking to him and acknowledges what I am saying"
- "trying to say new words"

The language group sessions have highlighted the need to manage parents' expectations of what the staff can do to tackle a child's underlying behaviour problems. There is some evidence that parents think that the language groups can deal with a range of child behavioural problems. The staff have spoken about the problems in dealing with behavioural problems in the time available during the sessions.

The staff understand that they may need to work on a child's behavioural issues before parents can see a change in their children's language skills. **However, the priority of the staff is to look at tackling a child's language development, while dealing with behaviour as a secondary issue.**

The support given to parents in helping them to manage their child's behaviour better has had a very positive impact on strengthening parent child relationship. A number of parents interviewed have spoken about the improvement in their own child behaviour skills, as a direct result of coming to the groups.

He used to be out of control. There has been a big change in his understanding, his behaviour has got getter, I can reason with him - *Sure Start Parent*

A number of parents have followed the suggested exercises at home with their children and have seen improvements in their children's language skills.

The early identification group has also been successful in identifying and giving appropriate support to children following a referral to the project.
The evidence from a focus group session with members of the project have identified a number of benefits to children and parents and also improved efficiency as a result of work of the team see Box 4

Box 4 - what are the benefits to parents of the early identification groups?

a) Project enables early advice to given parents and reduce potential anxiety
b) The screening process enables staff to ensure only appropriate children go on to early identification group
c) Staff able to filter out inappropriate referrals more speedily
d) Staff can see children in a natural play situation
e) Staff have more time to do a detailed assessment of the child’s needs
f) Less formal and potentially threatening process for parents new to the service

2. Developing information for parents

Project staff have introduced a number of different leaflets for parents such as ‘Hello Baby’. The leaflets are distributed to parents by Health Visitors. The leaflets give details about different things parents can do to support their child and also information about the work of different groups e.g. Cradle Club at Pleck library. A separate discussion pack has been developed for mother and toddler group visits.

Key challenges to the success of the project

1. Development of training programme

The project have made good progress in developing the training material aimed at raising awareness among staff working with children about the support available to them and also in identifying early signs of communication difficulties.

The project has only made limited progress in delivering the training that was originally planned. There are currently ongoing discussions with different groups about the training programme.

The planned training of staff is expected to result in an improvement in the support available to young children and an increase in the number of referrals in the future.

2. Development of an effective screening programme

As stated earlier in this report, the lack of reliable measure of the number of children with communication problems makes it hard to judge how big the problem is or which needs are not being met by the project at present.
The evidence from interviews with project staff suggest that the problem caused by the shortage of health visitors is unlikely to be resolved in the short-term and therefore alternative sources of information should be considered.

A list of alternative sources of evidence that could be used to provide a baseline of the language problems of children in the Alumwell/Pleck area is given below:

- Special educational needs register of children under 4 with language problems
- Walsall LA Nursery Entry Profile for schools in the Alumwell/Pleck area
- Walsall LEA Baseline Assessment Scheme for schools in the Alumwell/Pleck area

The planned SSLM work in April 2004 will provide some information about the number of children aged between 24 and 26 months living in the area, who have language difficulties. The information collected during this process will provide a baseline against which the impact of the project can be judged.

Another possible source of baseline information could be provided in the future by the Governments NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme. The Government has said that depending on the success of the trial there are plans to set up a national network of hospitals offering a service to screen all newborn babies for hearing defects.

8. **What difference has the extra funding from Alumwell/Pleck Sure Start made to lives of children referred to the service and their families?**

The evidence from interviews with parents and project staff suggests that the extra funding from Sure Start has made a practical difference to the lives of children and families referred to the project.

The language group sessions are well planned and delivered, with a strong focus in involving parents in all the activities. The project staff offer parents a flexible programme of support that generally meets their needs and gives them the skills needed to support what children have already learnt in the group sessions.

There is some evidence that staff are developing new ways of working with parents in the preparation of delivery of sessions. The work of the project has helped to strengthen links both within the team and also with external early year's workers from partner agencies.

There is some evidence that the work of the project has 'added value' to the existing services available to children by:

- increasing its presence at local venues
• increasing the number of people who have been trained to identify children with language problems

There is a tension, however, between delivering a flexible speech and language service which is responsive to the needs of a diverse community, while at the same providing a service which is cost effective.

The language group sessions make better use of staff time by enabling more children to been seen and supported. The evidence from parents suggests there is still a demand for individual therapy in addition to support available through the group sessions. At present the project is not able to meet this need with its current staffing levels.

The review has not looked at whether the project was cost effective (the achievement of the best possible outcome for a given level of resources) due to the limited time available. The issue of cost is clearly an important issue when planning or delivering new services. The evidence from unit cost work done elsewhere suggests that such projects are more expensive to deliver and also that it takes time to build new links with parents and staff working with young children.

However, such projects have the potential to produce benefits in the future for children living in Sure Start areas which are considerably greater, than their costs over a long period. The evidence from a recent report\(^5\) commissioned by the DFEE shows the problems in getting accurate information on the costs and benefits of different interventions for children at risk of low educational attainment.

The evidence from project staff suggests that good progress has been made in raising awareness locally about the type of support that is available and in changing view among parents and workers about what the service can do to support children with language problems.

9. Summary of key report findings

a) The design and delivery of the project has been shaped by the need for the project to meet national targets and the local priorities of the programme.

b) There is no evidence that parents or programme staff were involved in planning the activities for the project or setting the targets for the project.

c) The project staff provide a quality service to parents and children referred to them.

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d) The project targets are not detailed enough to judge the impact of the work or the progress being made. The project had met 90% of its original targets by February 2004.

e) The project has made good progress in improving and promoting access to the project at different local venues. The project has started to get self-referrals from parents who staff have spoken to at mother and toddler groups. Project staff have raised awareness among staff from other agencies about the role of the project and the support they can offer families.

f) There is a high level of parent satisfaction with the work of the language groups. Parents who have gone to the groups have seen a real change in their children as a result of coming to the groups. There is still a need among parents for staff to give individual therapy or support to children.

g) The rooms used by the language groups are in need of some improvement to provide a quality service to children.

h) There is no evidence of a significant increase in the number of referrals to the project when compared to a previous period. The number of Sure Start registered children coming to the language groups is small. The training of staff working with children is expected to lead to an increase in the number of referrals in the future.

i) There is no reliable baseline information about the numbers of children with language problems.

10. Recommendations

The report makes a number of recommendations for the members of the Partnership Board to consider. The recommendations are aimed at building on the good work that project staff are already doing to meet their targets and also addressing the weaknesses in the project which have been identified in this report.

1. The project targets need to be changed to make it clear:
   - what improvements or changes staff are expecting to see in children at the end of the project
   - how the planned activities will meet the current and future Sure Start target of reducing the number of children requiring specialist intervention by the age of 4.

2. An early meeting between project staff, parents and Sure Start staff should be set to agree what changes to the project are needed to meet the Government’s new targets.
3. Project staff from Speech and Language Service should consider if the current referral form should be changed to record details about the ethnic origin of children referred to the project, in addition information about the languages spoken in the household.

4. Arrange a meeting with staff from Alumwell and Hillary Street schools to talk about the changes project staff/parents would like to see in the rooms used by language groups.

5. Agree and set a baseline measure that could be used to judge the impact of the project and provide an estimate of the number of children with language problems.

6. Agree a priority training programme for staff from agencies that have been identified in the delivery plan.

7. Discuss staff ideas for increasing the number of referrals to the project.

8. Discuss with Speech and Language Service if parents can have more individual support during language group sessions.

Earl Piggott-Smith