



**‘WHAT WORKS IN INVOLVING  
PARENTS IN SURE START’?**  
**A Research Project for local Sure Start Parents**

**‘Working And Volunteering In Sure Start’**

Summary of Final Report- June 2004  
Communities Count

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Sure Start is a Government funded initiative aimed at providing services in the local community for children under four and their families. The long-term goal of Sure Start is ensure that young children and their families have access to a variety of health, social and educational services that will help children flourish and succeed once they get to school.

Parental involvement in Sure Start is considered crucial to the successful development of local programmes. The views of parents living in the community are central to shaping the programmes in a way that delivers services the local community needs, in a way the local community wants them.

This research project has been commissioned by five Sure Start programmes in North and North East Lincolnshire to evaluate parental involvement in the running of the programmes. The aim of the research is to establish what works in involving parents in decision- making in Sure Start and more generally within the day-to-day running of the programmes.

This report presents a summary of the findings from the second sage of the research, which took place between November 2003 and June 2005. Five programmes were included in the research Nunsthorpe & Bradley Park (1<sup>st</sup> wave), Scunthorpe Old Town (3<sup>rd</sup> wave) and East Marsh (4<sup>th</sup> wave), West Marsh & Yarborough and Northern Cleethorpes (both 5<sup>th</sup> wave).

The evaluation looked at what it's like for local parents to work as Sure Start staff members and local parents experiences as volunteers in Sure Start. A sample of staff members from each programme was also interviewed about what it is like to work alongside local Sure Start parents.

The following report is a summary of the findings of the research. A final full report has also been written and is available in each of the programmes. Recommendations for improving the experiences of all members of the Sure Start team are also included.

## METHODS

The evaluation looked at what it is like to work and volunteer in Sure Start. Semi-structured interviews were carried out. The interviews varied, but generally lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. Semi-structured interviews ask questions in a way that allows interviewees to answer in their own words. The type of research aims to capture what is happening and why.

A total of 107 interviews were carried out as follows:

<u>Group</u>	<u>Number of Interviews</u>	<u>Percentage of Total Interviews</u>
Local Parents employed	32	30%
Volunteers	27	26%
Staff	48	44%
Total	107	100%

## INTERVIEWS

The interviews aimed to find out what it is like for parents to work and volunteer in Sure Start. Staff members were also interviewed about working alongside local parents in Sure Start.

'Volunteer' was defined as those parents who give up their time to get involved in the programme by joining decision-making sub groups, and help to organise and run drop-in's, activities and events etc... They did not have to be 'official'.

Some of the key areas covered in the interviews were:

- What are the experiences of parents as Sure Start staff?
- Do parents feel their relationships with other local parents change?
- Do parents feel their relationship with staff/manager changes?
- Are there any barriers that stop parents enjoying their work?
- Do local parent members of staff feel that staff and parents take them seriously?

- What is a 'volunteer'? Are they CRB checked? Do they receive Child Protection training?
- Are there any services/activities that parents do not volunteer for?
- How much time do volunteers give?
- What do volunteers hope to get out of it?
- What are the different levels of involvement/volunteering?

Key issues explored in Sure Start staff interviews included:

- What do staff members think 'Partnership working with parents' means?
- What do staff members think about local parents being employed by Sure Start?
- Should volunteers be included in Team meetings?
- Should volunteers have the same access to training as staff?
- Have staff members changed the way they plan/delivery services as a result of involving parents?

A summary of the main findings follows:

## Summary of Findings

### Local Parents Employed By Sure Start

- ALL local parents working in their local Sure Start programme said they enjoy their job;
- 50 per cent of local parents employed in their programme had been actively volunteering before getting a job;
- 72 per cent of parents had volunteered in the programmes in some way before getting a job;
- Encouragement by staff members helps to motivate parents to apply for jobs in Sure Start;
- Most parents heard about the job by being around the programme;
- The majority of parents believe Sure Start provide enough training, support and encouragement to help them get back to work;
- 88 per cent of local parents employed in the programme said that applying for a job in Sure Start was relatively easy;
- Access to available childcare, especially 'wrap-round care' was the most common thing stopping parents getting back to work;
- 64 per cent of parents employed in the programme still volunteer in the programme to some degree;
- 87 per cent of parent employees believed their role as volunteer helped them get their job to some degree;
- The majority had a separate interview with local parents for their job - many found the local parent interview 'daunting';
- 78 per cent agreed that local parents should be involved in interviews for staff- however, the majority thought the process should be improved;
- Local parent employees work an average of 16 hours per week;

- Local parents are more likely to be employed in Family Support and Admin teams;
- Over 50 per cent of local parent employees believe other staff expect them to have an insight into the local area and be able to reach those 'hard-to-reach' families;
- All local parents said they felt they were given enough support to do their job;
- 97 per cent of local parent members of staff had never experienced any problems around issues of confidentiality;
- 75 per cent do feel part of the Sure Start team;
- Barriers stopping local parents feeling part of the staff team include, part-time hours and being based in the community;
- All those interviewed said they would be interested in going on more training for their jobs;
- 94 per cent of local parents employed by Sure Start had clear expectations for their future careers;
- 47 per cent had thought about a future career outside of Sure Start;
- Missing out on taking their own children to special events and activities was seen as one of the down sides of working in Sure Start;
- It can be difficult for parent employees living locally to 'switch off' after work;
- Some local parents experience changes in relationships with friends and local parents - particularly those employed in Family Support teams;
- Over 50 per cent of Admin and Family Support teams feel local parents put more pressure on them than other staff members.

## Summary Of Findings

### Being a Sure Start Volunteer

This section presents findings from interviews with Sure Start volunteers. Both 'official' and 'un-official' volunteers help out in the programmes. 'Official' volunteers are those who have undertaken the NCH route. This involves having an interview, CRB check and a clear job description for volunteers about their role. Not all programmes have this available to offer parents. 'Unofficial' volunteers are based in all five programmes. Most of those interviewed were 'un-official'.

- ALL volunteers said they enjoy their involvement with Sure Start;
- Most volunteers said they feel supported and encouraged by the manager and staff;
- The majority of volunteers in Sure Start are 'un-official';
- Some programmes have both 'official' and 'unofficial' volunteers;
- Benefits of taking the 'official' route were identified as:
  - Looks good on C.V;
  - References;
  - Experience;
  - Increase in self confidence;
- 65 per cent of 'un-official' volunteers were interested in becoming 'official';
- Not all volunteers wish to take the 'official' route where it is available;
- The majority of 'official' volunteers have been involved in their programme from the very early days;

- Changes in 'type' of involvement are only slight when volunteers become 'official' - but may increase the confidence of volunteers;
- Parents may need more support to become 'official', some may find the process challenging;
- 45 per cent of all volunteers had been using Sure Start services from the early days of the programme;
- The average time spent volunteering per week was 7 hours per parent, but ranged from 1 and a half to 25 hours;
- Reasons for getting involved in volunteering in the programme included,
  - Meeting new people;
  - Gaining new skills and experience;
  - Having an input into Sure Start;
  - Giving something back to the programme.
- The majority of volunteers said they would like to do more - 'lack of time' and 'lack of available childcare' were the key issues stopping parents doing more;
- 78 per cent of volunteers said nothing could make it easier for them to get involved- stating Sure Start already provide lots of help and support to make it easy;
- Training for volunteers varies from programme to programme;
- Some volunteer roles require minimum training - others do not;
- 76 per cent of volunteers had completed some sort of training they believe will help them in their role as a Sure Start volunteer;
- There is no training package for Sure Start volunteers and no consistency between the programmes;
- Examples of training undertaken by volunteers includes:

- Caldicott training;
  - Child protection;
  - Committee skills;
  - Confidentiality;
  - Minute Taking;
  - Participatory Appraisal.
- 
- Most volunteers could identify further training they felt would help them in their role;
  - The majority of volunteers believe their involvement in Sure Start will help them get a job in the future;
  - 35 per cent of volunteers expect a job in Sure Start in the future;
  - 56 per cent of volunteers do not believe parents should automatically be considered for jobs in the programme if they volunteer;
  - Some parents may find 'moving-on' from Sure Start difficult;
  - 50 per cent of parent volunteers wish their involvement to continue after their child reaches Sure Start age (5);
  - Local schools were identified as the most popular way for parents to stay involved in their children's development;
  - Taking the 'official' route to volunteering was seen as a means for continued involvement by parents, post- Sure Start.

## Summary of Findings

### 'Staff Experiences of Working in Sure Start'

- The majority of staff knew little if anything about the Sure Start ethos of involving parents before joining the team;
- The vast majority of staff said they enjoy working in Sure Start;
- Working in Sure Start can be stressful and challenging as well as enjoyable and satisfying;
- There is a wide mix of skills across the teams and between the programmes;
- Sure Start staff do believe that local parents should have a say in who works for Sure Start;
- The majority of staff believe that parental involvement in the interview process needs improving;
- Sure Start staff generally support the involvement of local parents in the programmes decision-making processes;
- Concerns about confidentiality were expressed by the majority of Sure Start staff;
- 94 per cent of staff had not experienced any problems with local parent employees/volunteers and confidentiality;
- Health teams expressed the most concerns about confidentiality;
- Benefits of employing local parents identified by staff included:
  - Extended local knowledge;
  - Ability to identify the strengths/problems of the local area;
  - May be easier for local parents to approach;

- The majority of staff in all teams have regular contact with Sure Start volunteers;
- Those staff who do not have volunteers in their team said they would be willing to work with volunteers if the opportunity came up;
- Issues of confidentiality and Child protection issues were seen as barriers that would prevent parents volunteering in certain areas;
- Health teams were most likely not to have volunteers in certain areas;
- Staff recognised that certain services available in Sure Start would not be provided without the input of volunteers, for example, Breast Feeding Support Groups;
- Most staff believe that volunteers should have access to the same training as staff- if it is relevant to their role as volunteer;
- The majority of staff believe that volunteers should be rewarded in some way;
- Staff believed that the role of volunteers will grow as the programmes develop;
- Most staff could give examples of where volunteers had made a difference to their programmes development;
- 70 per cent of staff had involved local parents in the planning or delivery of their services in Sure Start;
- All staff stated they would recommend parental involvement to their mainstream agency.

## Summary - Conclusion/Recommendations

### CONCLUSION

The final overall recommendations are suggested as ways of improving the experiences of local parents as volunteers and staff members working in Sure Start.

As the evaluation has highlighted, the experiences of local parents and staff are, overall, positive. All the volunteers and local parents employees reported that they thoroughly enjoyed their involvement in Sure Start.

The report also recognises that parents, Managers and staff have worked very hard to reach the level and quality of services available in the local areas. They are making a difference. Furthermore, relationships based on trust and mutual respect have been successfully developed. As the local programmes continue to develop friendly, supportive and approachable teams, the level and quality of parental involvement in the programmes increases.

However, the evaluation has also highlighted several key areas that could benefit from improvement. The final recommendations are suggested as ways of improving parents' experiences as staff members and volunteers in the programmes. The recommendations also aim to help improve the working relationships between staff members and volunteers/parents.

Some apply to all programmes; some are more specific to others. Each programme has a unique identity and as such, it is suggested that each programme develops the recommendations to suit.

The following includes recommendations from the Steering Group meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2004 at the Nunsthorpe & Bradley Park Resource Centre.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key areas were identified in the research as having the potential to cause problems for local parents and staff working and volunteering in Sure Start. They include:

1. Local parents, eligible to use services, employed by/volunteering in the programme;
2. The involvement of local parents in the interview process;
3. Staff concerns over confidentiality;
4. Exit strategy for local parents.

### 1. Local parent employees' and volunteers who live locally.

A Strategy for local parent employees and volunteers to deal with 'over burden' from some local parents should be developed to include:

- All local parents applying for jobs in the programme should be pre-warned about the 'out of hours' that may arise.
- A clear and easy way for staff to claim back time if necessary.
- Advice on avoiding non-urgent demands on time to include tactics such as;
  - i. 'Sorry, have not got my diary, can you grab me when I'm in the office'.
  - ii. 'Would you mind calling the office, I'm not sure/ don't want to tell you the wrong thing/forget you booking etc...
  - iii. 'Sorry I don't have that information with me, could you grab me when I'm at work and I'll sort it out for you'.

Of course there is also the option put forward that parents should apply for jobs NOT in their programme!

## 2. The involvement of local parents in staff interviews.

Involving local parents in staff interviews was seen by the majority of all those interviewed as being important. The following suggestions are recommended, with each programme to decide which strategy will suit their needs most effectively. This may well depend on the position involved, availability of parents etc.

Recommendations include:

### More Structure:

- Training for parents in formal interview techniques,
- Panel interview with 50 per cent parents - no further parent interview.
- Staff member (possibly parental involvement worker) to sit in on parent interviews to support parents and ensure no one parents dominates the decision of the group.
- Structured set of questions and scoring for parent interviewers.
- Timing to be looked at closely to avoid 'over-kill' for parents and children. May be possible to hold parent interviews over several mornings/ days. (Inequality for interview candidates who arrive at the end of a long morning when children are tired and getting hungry.)

### Less Structure:

- Have parents greet candidates in a crèche/drop-in and wait there for the formal interview - to avoid a separate parents interview.
- Take candidates along to whatever drop-in is on that day, no pre-selection of parents to interview- just ask those parents there on the day to help decide.
- Filter process that involves formal interviews to decide which candidates meet the benchmark. Those that meet the requirements to be called back to 'work'- set a task to work in the team with parents and staff for final decision.
- Timing - formal interviews held separately to parent interview. AM/PM or separate days.

The group decided that parents could be involved in interviews with parents they know, but that they must have completed interview training. Furthermore, questions should be pre-set and structured with a scoring system in place. A Sure Start staff member should also be present.

### 3. Confidentiality Issues

The group agreed that some staff would have concerns about confidentiality, especially those based in Health Teams. Trust takes time to build, but should be helped by reinforcing the issue with volunteers and ALL staff as often as possible.

#### Recommendations include:

Produce a leaflet for all staff, volunteers and parents, to include:

- Reinforce confidentiality at every possible opportunity.
- Be aware who is around at all times.
- Promote an 'if in doubt- keep it to yourself' ethos!
- All staff - never leave confidential papers out.

### 4. Support for parents 'moving-on'

For many local parents Sure Start has become a way of life. To assist parents with 'moving-on' and possibly transferring the skills and experience to other working opportunities, it is recommended that each programme develop an 'exit strategy' for those parents most involved in the programme.

#### Recommendations - 'Moving On'

Exit Strategies to follow 3 main pathways:

- Back into Employment - help and support for parents to find work outside of Sure Start in an area of their choice. Pathways for Lone Parents via Job Centre Plus will be central to this route, but also an option for other parents who may not fit the criteria for Pathways route.

- Suggestions for a Sure Start apprentice scheme. Sure Start to support parents to develop skills and experiences in a chosen area of the programme. Further suggestions that parents who undertake such a scheme be awarded some sort of recognition that would help them transfer their new skills outside of Sure Start.

*A Volunteer pathway.* For those parents who may not wish to go back into work, but wish to continue volunteering.

- Each programme to devise a training package for volunteers. Once parents have completed the training (to include CRB check) they receive a Certificate that could help them 'mainstream' their volunteering by being a Sure Start approved volunteer.
- A pack detailing volunteer possibilities available in the local community.
- Friends of Sure Start' schemes. To enable parents to continue to volunteer in Sure Start. Parents who continue to volunteer can 'earn' access to some services, e.g. trips, if they build up a certain amount of volunteering hours.
- Sure Start to develop close links with local Nurseries and schools. Possible 'hand over' of parents to schools in a volunteering capacity- those approved by Sure Start.

*A Further Education pathway*

For those parents who may wish to develop their level of qualifications and build on the training they have received during their time with Sure Start.

- 'Taster' courses for parents looking to improve their skills and education qualifications once their children go into full-time education.
- Advice on introductory courses, part-time and full-time courses, timing, grants, etc.

- Advice about qualifications needed for different jobs and starting points etc...could develop 'career -pathways' detailing the stages parents could work through to obtain qualifications for certain careers.

### GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are general across the programmes with the aim of developing the level and quality of parental involvement in the programme as staff members, volunteers and part of the Sure Start team.

- Training for Volunteers standard across the programmes for parents who wish to be a Sure start volunteer, without going down the 'official' route. Training to include:
  - Confidentiality training;
  - Caldicott training;
  - Basic Child Protection;
  - First Aid;
  - Committee skills;

#### Further recommendations include:

- Reward system for volunteers;
- Induction training for all volunteers- to cover policies/procedures etc;
- Each programme to develop a distinct 'Volunteer Team'. The team to be made up of those parent volunteers who wish to become involved in Sure Start;
- Team meetings to be used to develop the role of volunteers within the programme;
- The team to be central in the development and nurturing of future roles/opportunities for parent volunteer- both 'official' and 'unofficial' in the programmes;

- Volunteer team to work on developing a set training package/minimum requirement for volunteers;
- Volunteer team to have representation on other staff teams in the programme.

Any comments/queries will be welcomed,

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