

**Parental Involvement in the  
Sure Start Littlehampton Programme**

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September 2004

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those who agreed to taking part in this evaluation. In particular I would like to thank the Gail Walker, Health Team Co-ordinator, and Rachel Lockey, Sure Start Midwife, for their help and support. I would also like to thank Sue Logan, for all her help in transcribing the interview tapes.

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## Introduction

Parental involvement is at the heart of the Government's strategy for improving the lives of parents and young children in areas of deprivation. The Sure Start Unit has set a target for programmes to have a fifty per cent representation of parents on the Management Board within 18 months of approval. It is also recommended that a Parent Group be established to '*ensure that the voice of parents is strong and is not diluted by being one among many*': (Sure Start: Guide to Planning and Running Your Programme, Summer, 2002 Section 3.p.9)

Littlehampton Sure Start have an action plan and strategy for increasing and maintaining quality parental involvement in the programme. They also have a Capacity building programme which is defined as:

*'...activities (e.g. Training, Involvement in Working Groups, Monitoring) that enable and empower parents to fulfil their potential in participating in the management and work of the Sure Start programme. This also subsequently should lead to other life opportunities'*

Parents have been involved right from the outset of the programme in saying what was needed, deciding what they wanted, and helping to plan and contribute to the Delivery Plan. Eight parents or carers are currently represented on the Stakeholders Management Board and others are involved in the programme in a variety of ways, e.g. as volunteers, employees, on working groups, in the Parents' Forum and in offering peer support.

## Background

The current evaluation was requested by the programme's Evaluation Planning Group as the programme is concerned that there is some dissatisfaction amongst the parents regarding their involvement on the Board and because of concerns that the current strategies for increasing involvement in the programme do not seem to be working.

The Littlehampton Evaluation Support Group agreed that this evaluation should concentrate predominantly on parents who are involved in the governance of the programme in order to hear how both they, and the professionals\* feel with regard to parental involvement. It also looks at a parent-led breastfeeding support group.

The aim of the evaluation was to explore how the concept of parental involvement is conceived and experienced both by parents and professionals, and to further explore issues raised. The expected outcomes of the evaluation were:

- to give an opportunity for parents and professionals to reflect on their experience of parental involvement
- to identify 'good practice' in parental involvement
- a raised awareness of the importance of evaluation

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\* Apologies are made for distinguishing between 'parents' and 'professionals' in this way. The term 'parents' is used to denote all Sure Start and non-Sure Start parents who are involved in helping with the programme. The term 'professionals' includes all non-parent members of the Board who represent the partnership agencies, the Programme Manager and paid members of the Sure Start Team.

The evaluation addresses the following themes:

<b>Parents</b>	<b>Professionals</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding of 'Sure Start'</li> <li>• understanding of 'parental involvement'</li> <li>• experience of involvement/ initial feelings/changes</li> <li>• attitude of staff/professionals - valued/rewarded etc.</li> <li>• gains</li> <li>• barriers to involvement</li> <li>• future involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding of 'Sure Start'</li> <li>• understanding of 'parental involvement'</li> <li>• experience of involvement/ initial feelings/ changes to perception</li> <li>• Contribution/value of involving parents</li> <li>• barriers to involvement</li> <li>• future involvement</li> </ul>

## Methodology

The evaluation was carried out using semi-structured interviews with parents, staff and other professionals, a focus group which was held with parents involved in Milk, the Breastfeeding Support Group, and records of attendance at meetings were examined. The interviews were as follows:

- 8 interviews with parents on the Partnership Board
- 2 interviews with parents involved on the Parents Forum
- 12 interviews with professionals on the Partnership Board including six interviews with members of the Sure Start staff

All eight parents on the Board were interviewed but the professionals on the board were selected as representatives of the key statutory and voluntary agencies involved in the programme. The staff who were interviewed were the Programme Manager, the co-ordinators of the various teams in the programme and practitioners.

All parent interviews took place at the Sure Start Centre in Littlehampton. Parents were informed of the evaluation by the Health Coordinator and permission was sought for their contact details to be passed to the researcher. The researcher contacted the parents by telephone to arrange a mutually agreeable time for the interview and permission was sought for it to be recorded. Parents received a follow-up letter, giving full details concerning the purpose of the evaluation and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and a short questionnaire was enclosed which required a signature for consent to the interview. These were handed to the researcher at the interview.

Staff and professional interviews were arranged by telephone and were held in the interviewees place of work at a time which was mutually convenient. The researcher explained that the interview would be strictly confidential and anonymous. Verbal permission was sought for recording interviews.

## Findings:

### Sure Start, What is it?

Whilst both parents and professionals understood it to be an 'initiative, aimed at families with children under four which is Government funded, only the 'Professionals' described it as a social intervention, '*a drive to alleviate poverty*' and as being '*target driven*'. Its main aims were generally understood to be:

- providing support both for parents and children,
- teaching greater parenting and life skills
- providing opportunities for parents to get back to work and better life chances
- provision of childcare

Professionals saw it as being concerned with addressing '*inequalities.. social economic, health all aspects of people's lives*'. Initially it had been set up to provide a range of services at the **preventative** end for parents of children under 4 but as times has gone on, changes in the Government agenda has shifted the emphasis of the programme to one of **support** with the aim of alleviating poverty through developing parents capacity both as parents and potential employees. Sure Start is seen as a novel approach to working with families and delivering services, therefore, it is about changing working cultures and practices in mainstream agencies.

Whilst parents understood that '*loads*' of different agencies were involved, parents did not mention Government targets or that Sure Start was about a new way of working, although they did use the terms '*mainstreaming*' and '*partnership*'. They understood the 'supportive' role Sure Start plays with its aim being '*helping parents*' and '*getting the services out there better running*'. Only one parent defined it as being child focussed, none of the professionals described it as such.

*'It's a government initiative that's been set up to empower children and parents in deprived groups, sort of underprivileged groups, and raise their standard of living and their sort of life, the children' life expectations. The centre of it all is the child.'* [parent]

Parents also see it as an important source of information, however, one of the mothers saw that an important aspect of this was that parents should take the initiative to seek out information for themselves: '*it's about parents accessing it themselves, and helping themselves learning and growing.*'

Whilst parents mentioned the terms '*underprivileged*', and '*deprived*' a couple of times, parents tended not to use these terms although they did see it as being geographically determined in terms of being in a '*particular area*'. They see its main purpose as providing

- better facilities
- more services
- accessible information
- a better start in life for children
- support for parents and children
- parenting skills
- cheap childcare
- training and opportunities for employment
- improving the community

Both parents and professionals expressed frustration with the lack of Government direction or guidelines from the Sure Start Unit which they feel causes confusion and unnecessary time-wasting.

*'Sure Start is the most interesting and bizarre organisation. The way it's set up, the way it works, it's very hard to fathom. It's a bit of a muddle because there are no clear guidelines on the way things should run because you want to consult with the community and ask local parents. So every Sure Start is run differently. It comes in very different formats.'* [professional]

*'It's really infuriating about Sure Start is that there seems to be a distinct lack of national co-ordination of how the Sure Starts operate which could save us all re-inventing the wheel and that's been true from the very beginning.'* [professional]

Some professionals feel that the Government gives out mixed messages regarding their understanding of parental involvement.

*'On the one hand they're pushing this whole thing about getting everyone back to work fulltime but then we're also saying to parents you must be much more engaged and involved in the bringing up of your children – speaking with a forked tongue.'*

There is a feeling that, despite the rhetoric regarding 'social inclusion', the Government's real objectives are still unclear and that despite its drive to 'modernise' services, the way in which the Sure Start programme functions is still very much a bureaucratic process.

*'I'm less optimistic about the National direction. I'm not sure that it is as clear as it needs to be. It's still a bureaucratic process and our government will always make sure it works that way.'*

## **What does 'parental involvement' mean?**

Whilst 'Parental Involvement' is 'at the heart' of the Government's Sure Start philosophy, both professionals and parents alike felt the Government's intention to involve parents, is 'tokenistic'.

*'I would say the government's view is tokenistic.. They're very much driven by outcomes and there's pressure to deliver certain services. They do stipulate that we ought to be listening to parents but it's not become part of mainstream work to actually involve users in such a way...it's a new way of working.'* (professional)

*'Well I have to say I think it's tokenism...I think they want to be seen to be listening and then they go and do exactly as they want.'* (parent)

Perhaps, however, it is not realistic for the Government to set a universal target for the level of parental involvement in local programmes. As one professional pointed out, it very much depends on how each individual programme develops and on local needs.

## **What do the professionals think it means?**

For the Littlehampton programme, 'parental involvement' ultimately means building parents' capacity to be involved in working alongside professionals and to assist in the running of the programme at all levels, as much as they wish to be and as far as is possible:

*'Getting them to have a say in how the programme's run and listening to them and building their confidence and also giving them voluntary experience.. So it's at every level really from the governance of Sure Start to helping out at a specific group to helping them maybe going into some training, building self-esteem. It's about giving them self-esteem, giving them confidence to grow in confidence and opportunity to give them, to help them to work alongside us. But also to listen to them and even given them some authority alongside all the professionals, ...as to what they really need and what they really want.'*

The 'ideal' aspired to by the majority of professionals interviewed, is that parents should be 'equal partners' and they are committed to a much greater degree of involvement than at the 'token' level.

*'They should be involved in the design of programmes, the nature of need of programmes, the delivery, they should be capable of being either deliverers or making decision about who is delivering. They need to be part of the process that says 'is it working, is it not working, is there a better way to do it?'*

Although the ultimate goal may be that parents should be 'equal partners' in running the programme it was suggested that this is unrealistic because, ultimately, the three key agencies have the power of veto over the decisions which are made.

*#At the end of the day we the statutory bodies have to deliver what the government requires us to deliver and if the parents were to try and say ' but we want to deliver something totally different', they wouldn't be able to, so at the end of the day, they can never be equal...it remains an aspiration.. at the end of the day we can be sacked.'*

It was felt that, in Littlehampton, parents: *'have a big say on the 'how' and 'when' but less on the 'what' we do...'* A more realistic view of parental involvement then, is that there should be **parent representation** at all levels but ultimate control of the programme's organisation and decision making remains with the professionals because *'there's a cap to the amount of power they can have.'*

Professionals acknowledged that Parental Involvement is *'hard work'* and *'a struggle'*. Working in such a way had been found to be time consuming, because developing parents' skills and confidence to a level which enables them to participate effectively takes commitment, time and energy from staff. It also takes time and commitment for professionals to learn the skills to work with parents in this way and to adapt their traditional ways of working. For some, there are still issues of 'trust' to be overcome in terms of working practices. They find working alongside parents as equal players difficult because of issues around confidentiality and data protection.

*'It's hard having privacy in these rooms because people come in and out and actually you might be dealing with something that's personal or confidential and you've got parents who are involved in then project but actually not all aspects of the project are open to sharing. That's hard. Doing that has been difficult.'*

There was an acknowledgement from some professionals that some agencies are more experienced in involving parents as equal partners than others, and it can be very hard work.

*'...its hard for professionals to adjust to working with parents to enable them to take decisions and to be effective but also hard work to get professionals to accept parents at decision making level. Some have moved a long way, others not so far.'*

The professionals were asked about why they thought it was important to involve parents and what they feel they contribute. They placed enormous value on the parents 'lived' experience of bringing up children in the community and their ingenuity in coping, in often very difficult circumstances.

*'They've got their feet on the ground! They're realistic. They've got insight into local issues.. what suits their community.. a lot of that is gut instinct but generally it's their intuition that's important. They're very practical.'*

Professionals acknowledge that although they might think they know what parents need, parents are the 'professionals' when it comes to knowing and representing the views of the community because they are on the receiving end of services. The partnership between professionals expertise and parent expertise is, *'something very powerful.'*

In addition, professionals felt that parents contribute a huge amount of time, energy, local knowledge, enthusiasm and honesty. One professional admitted that agencies have a huge amount still to learn from parents and involvement was not as good as it could be *'...we tinker around the edges a bit.'*

### **What do parents think it means?**

The majority of parents felt that 'parental involvement' meant that they should work alongside professionals in the day to day running of the programme in terms of having *'an equal voice'*. In reality, though, they perceive there is a barrier to equality:

*'It's the fact that there is the barrier between professionals and parents...it's always going to be there because that's part of it. It's just going to happen.'*

They felt that professionals should shoulder the responsibility, not only because they are perceived as having the expertise, but because they are employed to do so.

*'Ideally the parents should be involved in everything and just working alongside and teaming up with people but obviously you can't take responsibility if you're not trained, we're not qualified and I think that has to be remembered. I think we should have an understanding as well of what goes on and vice versa...'*

The parents saw themselves as playing an important role in the running of the programme in terms of knowing what the community needs, but they recognised that they would not be capable of taking over running it.

*'I think professionals do know what they're doing. Whereas parents don't always know what they're doing.. they know what their needs are.... but you do need professionals to keep you on the right track.'*

Parental Involvement on the Board was acknowledge by parents as being difficult for professionals as well as for themselves: *'It's quite a big step for them because they are used to just getting on and doing it. They would have to change some of their policies.'*

Most of the current parents on the Board had become involved with Sure Start very early on because they were already involved with other activities in the area such as mother and toddler groups, the Toy Library or with the Wire project. Others had become involved after attending promotional events, e.g. Roadshows etc. Most had been approached by members of the Sure Start team or volunteered to help after hearing about the programme. A few

other parents had become involved after the programme was up and running. However, for one Board member it had taken a year's hard persistence in order for her to become involved and this had been very frustrating

*'I was cross and frustrated because I wanted to be in from day one.. I don't know why I had to keep chasing and chasing. I didn't know who I was chasing at the time. I would just get on the phone and say I haven't heard anything back yet, I want to be on the Board, I want to get involved.. I get a bit cross when you hear the partners on the Board saying oh, we need parents...I was really trying to and it took me a year to do it.'*

## **How did parents experience their first Board meeting?**

Partnership Board Meetings are generally held once a month and are preceded by a Pre-Board meeting. The Board is comprised of eight parents and a number of representatives from the statutory and voluntary agencies.

A number of negative adjectives were used to describe parents' initial feelings at their first Board meeting: e.g. *'horrible', 'difficult', 'nerve wracking', 'feeling nervous', 'weird'*.

Most parents had found the language incomprehensible and the paperwork, daunting. One parent had been brave enough to address this:

*'To start with it was really nerve racking because they've always spoke in their own language but then someone said, ' hey the parents are here, we don't really understand your lingo, can you speak to us like we are people' ..and it started off a really tense environment.'*

Another parent articulated how frightened and nervous she had felt because she felt totally unprepared as to what to expect:

*'I was nervous, wondering who was going to be there, roughly the feeling of walking through the door and wondering who was going to be about really and what they're going to ask me, what they're going to say, how it's going to be laid out, whether it was round a table whether it's with tea, coffee, biscuits or how it is, you know.'*

Another parent expressed how disempowered she felt:

*'It felt quite weird sitting there in front of all those professionals... sort of 'what do I do?' I didn't like to speak or anything in case you just looked stupid and you didn't really like to ask questions'.*

There had also been feelings of excitement: *'I felt really excited because something new was happening.'*

A couple of professionals spoke of having similar fears:

*'I've worked with parents for a long time but, to have a group of parents at a table, I think they don't realise how intimidating they can be.'*

*'It was quite difficult when you are new in an area and you're sitting in a meeting and you haven't quite fitted the names to the faces yet and the roles to the names, so it's quite difficult for me to get into the subject areas coming as a new person to that.'*

## How do parents experience meetings now?

### Pre-Board Meetings

Pre-Board meetings are held prior to Board Meetings so that parents can be briefed about what is happening and discuss agenda items in advance of the meetings. Parents very much enjoy these informal meetings which have generally been run by the Programme Manager. Although some may think that the Programme Manager may influence the outcome of these discussions, the parents are a strong minded group, as one parent reminded me:

*'You know we do have minds of our own. I think if the parents have got something to say they'll say it. He's telling us the way it is and we kind of make decision on that and there isn't a hierarchical feeling at all. It's a very fun, relaxed sort of relationship. Very jokey.'*

However, there was a frustration expressed that these meetings are sometimes a bit too relaxed and that important discussions do not always take place prior to the Board meeting:

*'It's too much chitter, chatter and coffee and mucking around and if it's supposed to be a pre-board meeting it should be important to talk about what we're supposed to be talking about...we need to have it sorted out before we go instead of going to a meeting blind.'*

### Board Meetings

The Chair of the Board was very much praised both by parents and professionals for the way he had made tremendous efforts to involve parents and to create an environment in which parents feel they can voice their opinions. He was very careful, for instance, to place the parents in a line opposite him, so that they could catch his eye easily if they wished to speak. Also he had made a point of learning and addressing everybody by their first names

Some parents now perceived meeting as *'quite enjoyable'*, even *'fun'*. Efforts are made to ensure parents have the opportunity to ask if they do not understand and, for parents with little confidence this may require enormous effort: *'If you don't understand something, you just have to ask. It's just having it in yourself to ask. Not to think I'm stupid not knowing what that is.'*

Parents are generally much more able to speak out, especially if the jargon has become too difficult for them to understand: *'Sometimes they all look round and they say 'are we speaking the jargon or something? And we all go 'yeah, and then they sort of adapt back.'*

Parents understand that much of the difficult language is created by Government who do not use parent friendly language:

*'...it all comes down from Head Office so they're these people sitting opposite are fed these lines and this jargon and then we have to kind of almost translate it into useable functioning ..oh it's awful really'. Sure Start on high, I think needs a real kick because they are not in touch at all with what's going on.'*

Some parents felt that their presence is still *'tokenistic'*. They feel they are tolerated in order that their presence can be minuted: just to say we've got parents on board. There is also still a feeling that they are patronised by some members of the Board and that their opinions are not always appreciated: *'it's just the way they speak to you, the way they react.'*

Others feel that things have improved and that they **are** being listened to, especially by the Sure Start team. They appreciate the fact that what they want cannot always be put into practice. However, they perceive that professionals do not always get their way either:

*'But now I think they are starting to stop and say well, actually, 'what do the parents think?' 'Do they want that?' I think sometimes we still get overruled but that's part of it. Sometimes the professionals don't get what they want either. Ninety-nine per cent of the time they do stop and listen, particularly the people within Sure Start.'*

There were several comments about how boring and dull the content of meetings and paperwork is: *it's just heavy and dull stuff... there's a sense that sometimes you feel you're like wading through treacle*

Some efforts have been made to try to make meetings less formal by removing tables but this had made coping with the paperwork and minute-taking, difficult.

### **How do parents perceive the partnership representatives?**

As can be seen in the table below, attendance over the last year has fallen off amongst the Partnership representatives, so much so, that the meeting in March was very nearly cancelled.

	2.5.03	6.6.03	2.7.03	18.7.03	26.9.03	5.11.03	19.12.03	12.2.04	30.3.04	12.5.04	30.6.04
Parents	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Sure Start	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
EYDCP	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Arun PCT	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√
Faith Community	√	√	x	√	x	√	x	x	x	√	√
L'hampton Town Council	√	x	√	x	√	√	√	√	x	x	√
Homestart	x	√	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	√
Arun Comm. Churches	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√	x
WIRE	x	x	x	√	√	x	√	x	x	√	x
Social Services	x	√	x	x	√	√	√	√	x	x	x
Arun District Council	√	√	√	x	√	√	√	√	x	x	x
WSH&SCT	x	√	√	x	√	x	√	√	x	x	x
Partnership SG	√	x	x	√	√	x	x	x	x	x	x
GOSE	√	x	x	x	√	x	x	x	√	x	x

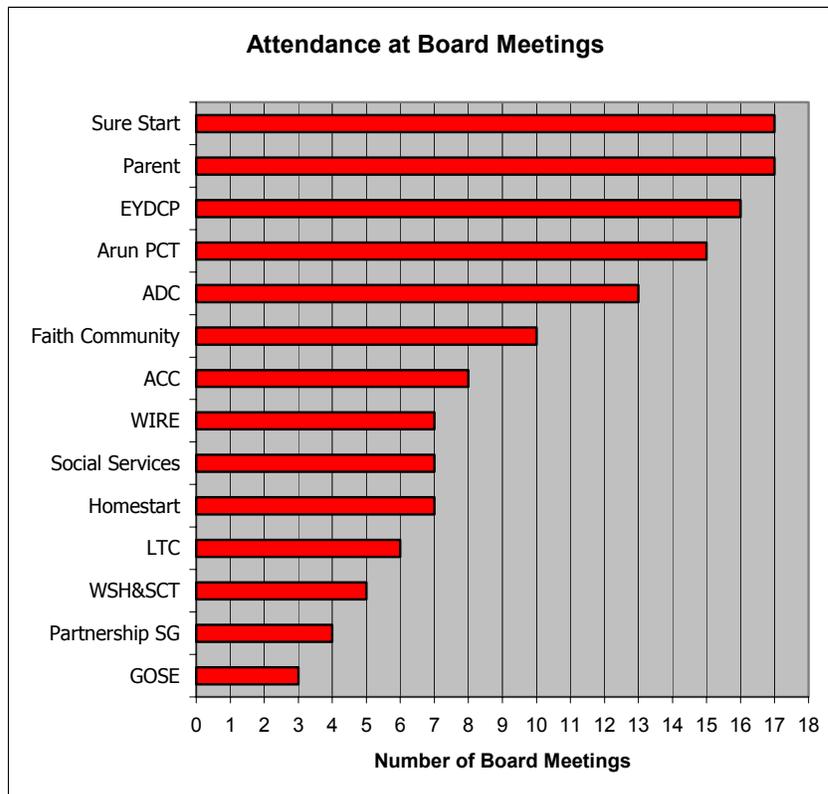
Parents felt that some of the other agencies involved in the programme are not really committed to the programme and do not contribute much to meetings. Some suspect that they may be attending for ulterior motives:

*'I suppose it's sometimes to get them out of the office, I don't know but sometimes I sit there and I think I see the same faces and some of them seem to switch off depending on whether they've an input or whatever. Some of them, they just sort of sit there and I think oh, you know, they haven't got much to say.. I wonder if they're the ones that should really be there.'*

The parents are very conscientious about their role and they feel frustrated that some professionals regularly miss meetings. They resent the fact that they give freely of their time but the professionals, who are paid to attend meetings, do not.

*'Hardly any professionals turn up.. all the parents are there, so many meetings that you turn up to and other people aren't turning up and you think, I'm not getting paid for this, I doing this voluntarily and I can be bothered to turn up. Paid staff are not coming and you think,, what's the point of me keep wasting my time when others aren't ...It shows that us parents are more dedicated.'*

This, they felt was particularly true of Arun District Council who appear only attend if *'they have to do something there'*. However, the graph below shows that out of the possible seventeen meetings, which have been held over the last 18 months the programme, Arun District Council have, in fact, been represented at 13 of them.



Parents were particularly scathing about Arun District Council for a number of other reasons. They find their bureaucratic way of working frustrating because it slows up the process of achieving anything: *'they don't deliberately throw a spanner in the works, but it's because of their way of working which is so archaic.'*

The also find their use language, especially the jargon they use, difficult to understand, and feel that the way they were initially treated by them was *'appalling'* although it was perceived that their attitude had improved: *'they actually speak to us.. I mean, beforehand you wouldn't have got an acknowledgement from (the Council) ..now they say 'hello'.'*

## How do professionals experience board meetings?

One professional who has a great deal of experience in multi-agency settings found the first Board Meeting she attended to be a very positive experience and quite different from her experience of parental involvement at other multi-agency meetings. She was particularly impressed at how the group of parents on the Board appeared to be so in-tune with what was happening and their responsible attitude as a 'voice' for all Sure Start parents. She described her initial impression and how this meeting differed from anything she had experienced previously:

*'There were certain features about it which I suppose I found unusual ..in particular I was really impressed by the strength of the parent involvement in the meeting. . I was very impressed by how articulate they were, how well prepared they were, how passionate they were and how well they contributed and were included in the overall discussions during the meeting. I have attended other multi-agency groups which has parent representation and it works very differently. They don't speak to the group in quite the same way. They don't come along as well prepared and they don't seem to have a feel for the overall business in quite the same way. They're very much personal interests that bring them to the table.. whereas, I felt with this group of women that they actually.. they take some responsibility for representing other parents who are linked with Sure Start. .it didn't feel like people were just there for their own personal interests. As a first impression it was a very positive one. I didn't have a sense that there as any sort of sense of paying lip service to this participation, it felt real.'*

The professionals really enjoy the challenge parents present and are impressed by their courage to stand up and make them think in much more creative ways about how they present things.

*'They demand that the partners speak in a language that they can understand. They demand to understand why, not just take an assumption... they're bold enough, they're courageous enough to say 'what's the obvious reason?' I like it ... I like the challenge they give.'*

The Chair confessed that parental involvement had, at times, been a real challenge. He reflected on two important moments: One was when he recognised the importance of seating the parents directly opposite at meetings so that he could recognise their body language when they wished to contribute. The second, was when one of the parents told him to 'shut up' because she felt she had more to say than him: *'And I said yes, you're absolutely right, I am dominating this discussion, I should listen.'*

The parents honesty had enabled professionals to admit that they too find the language difficult: *One parent said: 'we don't get this', then one by one the statutory body kind of people, people like myself said, 'actually we don't understand it either.'*

The Professionals are equally frustrated that Board meetings are run in a very traditional and bureaucratic manner and would like to see much more creative ways to run meetings.

*'It should be more colourful as well. It's no good just giving a parent just 10 sheets of paper and often we do that as professionals don't we. We expect people to read it and to pick out the main points.'*

Some feel that parents are still not involved enough and that it is still very much a forum for delivering information in which parents play the role of spectator. They would like parents to be more interactive in the process, possibly in assuming specific roles on sub-committees or projects, and in presenting information to the Board, themselves.

It was acknowledged that there had been problems involved in forging working relationships with Arun District Council, the Accountable Body, because it appeared that the ADC were *'holding things back'* all the time. However, this was mainly due to the lack of understanding about the way in which the Council works and the nature of their role.

*'None of us realised that, because we don't know how they work ...their role is to be banker, the accountant, the auditor, that means they are always in a controlling position... it's just unfortunate that Arun get labelled with being people who hold things back.'*

Concern was expressed that some agencies were *drifting away from the table* and not assisting and supporting the development of the programme in the way that it was hoped they would. One professional was very cynical about the reasons for this:

*'I think probably because there was a lot of money being thrown around, there were slices of pie to be carved up which was a nice incentive for them to be there – there was a lot of interest from voluntary agencies and statutory bodies who thought 'what can we get out of this, how can we benefit from this?'*

Of particular concern was the lack of recent input from some of the voluntary agencies who for some unknown reason had taken a step back from their representation on the Board. This was very much regretted as they have valuable knowledge of working with parents, and the community.

## **Is the Parents' contribution valued?**

Generally, professionals really enjoyed having parents on the Board and found it a stimulating and exciting experience but opinions differed as to how much their contribution is valued. There was a perception that some professionals were more open to working with parents than others and that there are different levels of 'value'. It was felt by the Programme Manger that at senior level, parental involvement was definitely valued but at practitioner level, it maybe more of *'a mixed bag'* because of the 'trust' issues mentioned before. There are issues around whether parents who are involved on the Board are valued more than those involved on the fringe but it was felt that progress is being made.

*'...issues around integration, meaningful interaction, you know, identifying their roles and where that sits in the whole. 'We're on the road...it's not like we're banging our heads. I just think we've got a lot of work to do there.'*

It was acknowledged that valuing people takes time which most professionals lack. It also take time, ensuring all parents are valued equally rather than just those who are the most vociferous: *'sometime we don't have time to actually stop, and maybe we don't have enough time to stop and say thank you and that you're really doing something that is valuable.'*

## **Do parents feel their contribution is valued?**

There were mixed responses to this question. Generally, they felt more valued by the Sure Start Team than by the other members of the Board. Some of those who had been involved right at beginning felt their contribution had been very much valued at the start but as the programme has grown they had begun to feel less valued: *'in like the parents forum we were told you should not be going because it's supposed to be for the new people.'*

Praise and thanks, particularly from the Programme Manager, had been greatly valued. However, as the programme had grown it was perceived by some that the staff and become very busy and that their contribution was now being taken for granted. They felt devalued, they had lost their office space and they felt the personal touch had gone.

*... now we haven't even got a desk in the office. If I pop in...you know you don't see him (the Programme Manager) and the other sort of professionals you don't see apart from at the Board so...no, I don't think we are valued as much now as we were.*

There is a perception, however, that recently Staff are making more of an effort to thank parents for their time and are sending out 'thank you' cards to parents who participate in recruitment interviews.

Some parents felt that there is an element of favouritism with some parents contribution being more valued than others.

*'You've got certain people who will get their own way if you know what I mean and some that just, when you're saying something you think well what's the point of me even trying to put my opinions across because I'm not listened to because I'm not so and so.'*

## **Should Parents be rewarded for their involvement?**

The issue of whether or not parents should be rewarded has dominated discussions both at Board Meetings and the Parents Forum for a number of months and has caused some heated discussions.

### **What do the Professionals think?**

There was frustration expressed that the matter of parental rewards has not been thought through by the Sure Start Unit so that there are no guidelines or models of 'good practice' to follow:

*'I can't believe that Sure Start, as a national programme, hasn't come across this question before. I don't believe that Littlehampton SS is the first group to say we want parental rewards and yet my issue locally is why are we trying to re-invent the wheel. There must be a good model somewhere that parents are working to.'*

All professionals agreed that parents should be rewarded in some way for their involvement in the programme but exactly how they should be rewarded evoked differing responses. All acknowledged that parental involvement in the governance of the programme is very time consuming and some thought a distinction should be made between rewarding parents involved with the governance and those involved in other ways. However, there was a concern that rewards for involvement on the Board might act as a barrier to involving new parents as existing parents may be reluctant to step down.

Generally, it was agreed that it is a difficult issue and requires careful thought and management. If rewards are only for governance, should that, for instance, include parents who attend the Parents Forum? There was some feeling if a parent was elected as Chair they should receive some payment.

Interestingly, some professionals believed the idea of monetary reward had come from the parents themselves:

*'I can understand, I know exactly where they're coming from because they say, well I go there and I'm paid to be there. They go there, you know, they're giving up half a day of their time, they're putting as much into the meeting as I am, and they're hopefully representing young parents on the estate and they feel that they should be rewarded. It's a difficult one to deal with.'*

The Programme Manager does not like the idea of monetary rewards. He has been happy with the informal approach, of 'treating' parents which he felt had been in keeping with the philosophy of the programme: *'I considered it part of the learning, growing, developing process for that parent group.'* He strongly feels that giving parents new experiences, such as going out for meals or going on trips, was offering them novel experiences which was helping develop their communication skills, social skills, confidence and self-esteem. In his view it is part of capacity building.

He feels that he has been *'forced'* to explore other more accountable and *'rigid'* options, and he is concerned that any method of payment, either directly or in terms of vouchers may become act as a disincentive, as it may be detrimental to parents claiming benefits. Arun District Council, however, are equally aware that any method of reward which disadvantages parents, is totally unacceptable: *'we can't do it if it disadvantages the parents in a different way.. because to me it would be taking with one hand and giving back with the other.'*

Some professionals feel the point system is 'tokenistic'. It puts a value on individual's contributions and, in some cases, may cause parents to be involved for ulterior motives:

*'The idea for me of rewarding someone is a bit like collecting points on your Nectar card and you know, I'll go there because I can get more points. It's the kind of thing you do with children for pocket money ... I don't want parents thinking 'oh I'll got to that meeting because I'll get more points'. Then the fact that they're looking after their own children suffers because they're busy attending meetings for points.. you don't want to pay them like you would a decorator.. rent-a-parent kind of thing. I don't want parents coming along thinking 'oh, yes, we get a fiver for coming to that..'*

Despite the parents' criticism of the Accountable Body, it seems that, in fact, their concern is not so much that parents should have a financial reward for their contribution but that whatever reward is given, whether it be a meal out or a reward point, it should be *'transparent'*. They were in no doubt that any out of pocket expenses parents incur should be recompensed in monetary terms, however, their real concern was that rewards should be of value and not be used to coerce parents into helping:

*'I don't mind if it's a meal out if that's the reward that we're going to give them, fine, it needs to be recognised within the SS Board process but it needs to be transparent ..it's a really good opportunity to build up relationships as long as it's not saying – I need all you to...well there is a direct conflict of interest –that's why I think it needs to be transparent and for no other reason. What you've first got to do is accept that there's a difference between payment and reward. If the value is that's the night out we're going to take you, which is your meal, your drink, and transport – brilliant – you've got your reward and it's value to you . If however, you've only collected 30 points, well you'll have to make a contribution to the evening...I don't care but the end point is it must be valuable to them, otherwise it's not rewarded, it's patronising tokenism.'*

A point, made by one professional that rewarding people in monetary times is in fact a bad 'role model' in terms of parenting. Parents should be rewarded for their contribution by giving something which is of value to them.

*'I'm telling parents don't always reward your children just with money... Likewise we need to be careful not to say if you do this for us you will get this. I think it's about giving encouragement, it is about giving value. .it's sometime saying let's treat you to go away for the weekend or here's a*

*voucher to go and get pampered or here's a Tesco voucher. And we need to be thinking about rewarding in the broadest sense, giving of our time and giving of our, I was going to say love, care.'*

Whilst being a bureaucratic method, some professionals felt comfortable with the new point system which had been introduced. They regarded it as a fairer system as it offers a 'direct' reward because some parents contribute more than others

Others felt that parents should be rewarded in terms of showing appreciation, whether that be verbally or by means of a card to thank them for their time. They felt the fact that parents are offered free childcare and have intrinsic reward is sufficient

*I think in itself they are rewarded as they go on with childcare and the status and everything else they have. I agree that there's an intrinsic reward for just being there and feeling more confident, building up skills and feeling that you are making a difference, for some people that is enough.*

### **What do parents think?**

The majority of parents interviewed have been quite happy with the informal system of reward. When asked if they thought they should receive reward for their input they were very altruistic in their responses. Most felt the intrinsic rewards for helping were enough. They felt they were getting so many things out of being involved e.g.:

- seeing the project through from start to finish,
- having a 'voice'
- giving time to something you believe in
- gaining skills
- having something to work for
- meeting people
- learning new things
- sense of achievement

They very much valued the fact that being involved in the programme had given them a purpose; they are doing something for themselves rather than just being a mother:

*'It's getting me out of the house more than anything. It's getting me out and being around adults instead of being stuck at home all day. We knew what we were getting into when we first joined on. We knew we weren't being paid. We knew that it was just our opinion that counted.'*

Parents felt strongly that being involved gave them the satisfaction of knowing that they were improving their own lives and helping the community. When asked how they would like to be rewarded, the majority just wanted appreciation and to know that their contribution is really valued.

*'I think words speak much better than any monetary value anyway, sort of, if you feel as if you've been appreciated then I think, you know that makes you on much more of a high than 'oh here's a five pound voucher'. I'd much rather have someone really appreciate what I've done.'*

One parent made the distinction between paid and voluntary work and felt that being a volunteer gave her the freedom to choose whether or not, and to what extent, she wanted to be involved:

*'It doesn't become a voluntary thing it's more of job then isn't it. Voluntary means well if you can't do it then you're not tied, someone's not saying 'well we're paying you to do this', you'd say, 'I'm really sorry but you know I can't do it that week'. Once you get into the realms of paying somebody then*

*it's performance evaluation ...I think it's about giving as much of my time and as much of me as I can, but I don't feel that anyone's evaluating me and saying I'm not really worth it.'*

Parents felt that receiving payment in any form for involvement would, inevitably, 'open up a whole can of worms' and the proposed new token system had caused feelings of fear and resentment. They were concerned as to how the proposed point system might work and they were worried as to how it may affect those receiving benefits. An attempt by Arun District Council to allow parents to spend the sum of fifty pounds as a reward for their involvement on the Board, and then to reclaim it, had been disastrous. There had been delays in parents receiving payments and, when it had been paid, it was in the form of a cheque. Many parents do not have bank accounts and when one parent had tried to explain this to the Council she had been ignored and it had led to some parents feeling resentful: 'undervalued and like beggars.'

The proposed point system, which allows parent to accumulate points towards payment by vouchers, is causing resentment because some parents are invited to participate more than others:

*'You're going to get a point if you got to a Board meeting, you're going to get a point if you go to the pre-board, you're going to get a point if you sit in on an interview. Well not everyone is asked to do interviews, so you're going to get ones who get more point but they always get asked to do the same things.'*

## **Should a Parent become the next Chair?**

At the time the evaluation, one of the dominating issues was whether or not a parent should be elected to assume the role of Chair as the existing Chair Person, a professional, was resigning his post.

## **What do the professionals think?**

Whilst the majority were generally in favour, there was some cynicism that it may be a token gesture.

*'...it was always stated from very early days I remember when they talked about parents being involved and they said 'oh yes, one day hopefully a parent will Chair this'. In some ways it always was a bit of a professionalist agenda to make sure that a parent would...rather than naturally allowing the right to Chair to come out whether it was a parent or not. And it may have happened because the agenda may have been to be seen to have a parent Chair because it looks quite good on paper to the government. You know, 'oh our Sure Start Board's Chaired by a parent.' Possibly you could challenge that being Chair is tokenistic.'*

Those in favour were cautious as to whether or not it was the right time or whether or not parents, at present, have the capacity to take on the role. Some professionals were very positive about the idea and confident that there were parents currently on the Board who were more than capable. However, there was concern that it may turn out to be a bitter contest which might cause resentment and cause the chosen parent to become isolated from her peers.

Other professionals were concerned that parents had not received appropriate training, nevertheless they were confident enough that the parents themselves would not be taking on such role if they did not think they were competent enough:

*'It might be too soon. The obverse is I think the parents are sensible enough to know if they couldn't do it, they'd have said 'no'. I think that's the strength of them.'*

Whether or not parents have the present capacity to carry out the role, professionals articulated what they perceived as the importance of the role and the skills which are required. Managing the direction of the programme is very different from the parents' present role of *'influencing, in commenting, in chasing and cajoling.'* It would be a real challenge.

It was recognised that in a partnership, all have an equal right to be Chair, but the issue of concern was whether or not sufficient effort had been made in building the capacity for a parent to be elected. One professional felt in hindsight, that lack of training had been *'a mistake'* and that a parent should have been acting as co-chair during the last year. There was general agreement amongst professionals that whoever takes on the role, would need to be very carefully steered:

*'I think they would need lots of hand-holding. I think there needs to be a handover and mentoring period .it's about working with someone, to sit with her, to help pull out the points prior to the meeting, how she might handle it etc...to develop reflective practice to maybe help identify the support that she needs.'*

Opinions differed regarding which agency should be responsible for taking on the mentoring role. Some suggested it should be the Programme Manager. Professionals praised him for his ability to motivate and supports parents but it was thought by some that he may not be the appropriate person to support the Chair because of his vested interested in the programmer: *'He is ultimately the one where the buck stops'*.

Some thought that a parent Chair who is too reliant on the Programme Manager for support, may not be objective enough. This may cause a conflict as part of the Chair's role is to sometimes encourage the Board to disagree with the Programme Manager.

There were a few concerns expressed about whether or not a parent would be able to withstand peer pressure in making decisions and this may cause stress and anxiety. Also there was some fear that the power of the position might go to their heads.

*'...it is difficult for anyone to be on the Board to have other parents, you know, voicing their worries or concerns and not be biased in some respect, and actually be the voice of all Sure Start parents and not just the minority. It's a big responsibility.'*

There was a concern regarding potential conflicts which may arise if a parent become Chair particularly with regard to probity issues especially those members representing the three key stakeholders.

The type of support which is required needs to be clearly defined before the appropriate agency is chosen. A suggestion by one professional was that the ideal agency to support a parent Chair would be the Early Years Unit. It was suggested by others that there should be a 'support package' which might need to be from outside the statutory sector because the voluntary agencies have much wider experience of working with parents. Some felt that the support should come from all the agencies involved in Sure Start.

Regarding training needs, it was agreed that there are many skills required of the Chair, including knowing how to be inclusive not only in encouraging the less articulate or confident parents to have their say, but in facilitating other members of the partnership to be fully

involved in the decision-making process. The Chair needs good organisational skills and diplomacy in being able to carry decisions forward to ensure that things happen.

A suggestion was made that if a parent is elected they could attend one of the Arun District Council's training programmes regarding how to run meetings. Another suggestion was that this training should come from the Sure Start Unit itself.

Other training needs which were identified, concerned managing meetings, enabling the business taking place and determining priorities. There was also a concern that the role demands a great deal of background experience and knowledge, which takes time to acquire and a parent Chair may actually feel disadvantaged and excluded by not having this.

Generally, professionals did not like the idea that the role of parent Chair should be shared amongst parents on a rotational basis. One professional commented that, in fact, this may disempower parents because they could never learn enough in the short space of time in being Chair to hold the important debates needed for making decisions.

Preferable was the idea of parents acting as Co-Chair, whether this be with a fellow parent or with a professional from another agency. Although a parent as Chair is the **programme's** ideal, it was considered important that all organisations should have the opportunity to share their views on the matter, as it may be that some organisations might feel it important that they have a representative as Chair.

Another suggestion is that there should be a Deputy Chair, someone who is experienced in running meetings to work alongside a parent chair to offer support. However, this was seen by some to be rather patronising: *'it's almost saying: actually by yourself, you're not good enough.'*

A concern was expressed by one professional that a parent Chair might want to change the style in which meetings are held and this may lead to other partners struggling with their commitment to the programme: *'Would they feel this is wasting my valuable professional time?'* On the other hand, other professionals thought that they may find it really stimulating and a challenge.

Concern was also expressed about whether or not a parent was an appropriate ambassador for the programme, as a substantial role of the Chair is to promote and develop the programme.

### **What do parents think?**

The parents expressed mixed views. Some felt that as they seem to be the majority in attendance at meetings, it was appropriate that the Chair should be a parent. They thought professionals were in favour of the idea because it is part of the parental involvement policy rather than actually wanting them as Chair. They thought that some agencies might find it difficult because it may present a threat to their existing ways of doing things.

Some parents felt they were confident enough to meet the challenge and were frustrated that although the idea had been agreed in principle two years ago, it had taken so long to achieve. Others, although agreeing the principle, did not feel they would like to take on the role. Some parents felt that it was not appropriate at this moment in time, and there were one or two who did not feel it was an appropriate role for a parent at all.

Those who favoured a parent as Chair thought it important in terms of being able to inform other Sure Start parents about what is happening and because parents are much better in touch with their own needs: *'The parents have ideas about what they want and the professionals might be totally different.'*

Some parents voiced concern that there had not been sufficient training and that with the development of the Childrens' Centre, things are too *'chaotic'* at the moment: *'we need the building up, we need things to be settled.'*

Some parents expressed fears as to whether not a parent would be sufficiently objective. They felt the outgoing Chair had been sufficiently distanced from the day-to day running of the programme not to be too overly involved. There were concerns that a parent may find it difficult to keep their personal views contained and this may cause conflicts of interest.

Parents perceived that it was very important for a Chair to have *'good people skills'* and to be able to hold meetings together. It was perceived that there were a few parents who do have these skills on the Board.

Some parents liked the idea of sharing the Chair on a rotational basis as this would give them all an opportunity to develop the skills required and to experience what it is like to be in this position: *'then we could see what it's like and how to keep the meeting together when everyone's arguing and I think it would give us more an idea of what the job's actually about.'* However, for others who are not so confident, such an idea was a daunting prospect.

Some parents were concerned as to how the voting process would take place. They thought it important that parents who want to stand for Chair should have an opportunity to tell others on the Board why they want the post and that voting should be by secret ballot.

## **Do parents have any concerns about their involvement on the Board?**

During the course of the interviews with parents a number of frustrations were expressed about their involvement with the programme. There was some disillusionment that despite all their hard work they did not feel that they really have a *'voice'* and that ultimately, their efforts may not have been worthwhile:

*'I'm not as enthusiastic as I was before.. we haven't got anywhere and things are still the same.. you think what's the point of battling on when we can't change anything...'*

*'I just have this vision of sort of ten years down the line when the funding stops it's just all going to fall apart and disappear.'*

There were many frustrations about the time it takes for decisions to be implemented: *'everything works so slowly'*. They were also frustrated because parental involvement on the Board had not *'grown'* because there are no new parents coming forward. This had caused some parents to lose their enthusiasm

*'I think I've lost the oomph ...I feel I've been looking so many months back thinking that right by this date or by a certain time it's going to grow and we're going to see different new faces. You walk in and it's the same.'*

There was also resentment from some long-serving members, that as Sure Start has got bigger, they have not been asked to contribute as much and this had made them feel unappreciated. One parent described that she felt 'lost':

*'I do sometimes think that Sure Start's got bigger and some of which I call your reliable older ones, they sort of get lost, they've got lost in the crowd and I feel sometimes when I am worn out and tired ...I just feel lost, I don't use the word 'pushed out' because I'm always made to feel very welcome...I just feel sometimes lost.'*

A major concern of many parents was the amount of time they are now putting in to being on the Board. They feel under pressure from staff to do things. This often causes conflicts and guilt:

*'There is something nearly every day and you feel obliged to do things...I've got all my stuff to do at home and then I'm not giving time to my (child) which I would like to do... because we're in this for our children and we're putting so much time into that, we're not looking after our own.'*

*'The other day I deliberately thought I'm not going to do anything. I said to him (her child) 'what do you want to do? He looked at me and said 'I don't know' – poor little love, because I've done it for so long he didn't even know what to do with me.'*

The pressure is not only from staff but also from their peers who criticise them if they do not become involved.

*'...if you don't do things, people – other parents do say, 'well that one doesn't do this, this one doesn't do that, they don't go to this, they don't go to that', so you don't want people saying that about you.'*

One parent was a little angry that she had been asked to help with administration but had not realised that, in fact, she was providing cover for a paid professional who was on maternity leave.

## **What do Parents feel they have gained from being involved?**

*'I've gained tons...it's just been a lovely experience, something really positive.'*

Despite the fact that there are some feelings of disillusionment, all parents praised the Sure Start team highly for their dedication to the programme: They felt '*privileged*' to be working alongside professionals and felt they had gained so much from Sure Start .

*'I think it's great...it's a privilege They're always there.. they're fantastic.. there's always a voice at the end of the phone for you.. you don't have to be alone.'*

They were very positive about what they felt they had gained from the experience. All felt that they had gained in confidence:

*'Confident. I've gained self-respect, confidence. I've learnt how to look after my child as in parent and things.... I've done many things so, if I was to walk away tomorrow, I would have gained so much.. I've done really really well with the project.'*

The felt they now had become more assertive and felt they had a 'voice' and that they could speak to those in authority without feeling inferior. This had given them the confidence to be able to advise others.

*'I've gone from just sitting in the back of the corner, to being able to voice my opinions, get involved to say yes, I'd like to do this and I'd like to get involved and help out. It's given me the opportunity to speak with sort of higher people... Other people will come up to me and ask if they've got a problem or if they need something and if I can't help I sort of know someone in the Sure Start team who will be able to sort of do it in the right way.'*

It had stimulated them and made them feel 'alive' as a person in their own right, rather than 'just a mum doing nothing'. Becoming involved with the Programme had improved their self-esteem and made them feel better about themselves.

*'I feel better about myself...I was just a mum, that's what I was...now I feel that I'm a person.. when I come and do some voluntary work [the staff] say like, that's fantastic, thank you well done. And it's great and makes people realise that you're not just a mum, you have got a brain behind all that you know.'*

Many spoke about their feelings of isolation prior to becoming involved and for them, it had created the opportunity both for themselves to get out of the house, to meet others, make new friends and feel part of the community.

*'Personally I just feel a lot happier because I've made a lot more friends. The children have made a lot of friends ..I was very down and depressed before because I didn't know anyone. I've met lots of people. . I've made friends, I've got close to a lot of people that I knew but wasn't actually friends with ...there something to do to keep yourself occupied. I feel part of something,'*

Parents also felt that their new found 'freedom' had made them a better parent because they were doing something for themselves. It had also given them skills and the confidence to get back into the workplace. *'getting the experience to go back to work if I wanted to. I've been in the working environment again, I'm not just sitting at home doing nothing.'*

Some parents felt really empowered. One parent described her feelings about being involved on the interview panel for recruiting the Programme Manager:

*'We all sat as parents on the Board we were asked to view the candidates We all spoke to them and asked them questions and they were taken out to a different area and we all sat and spoke about it and... we all we went for Stuart...that made me feel really good and it's like, wow, we chose him. We said he was the one for us.'*

Sitting on interview panels had also allowed parents the opportunity to gain interview skills and understand about the importance of the application form in the job seeking process. This had made them really optimistic that they would be able to get employment when they were ready to do so.

*'I know exactly what to put on an application form and what sort of they're not interested in so,, you make sure you've got the vital things they're asked for because, if you haven't, you're not even going to get short-listed. So that's been very helpful.'*

One parent commented on how it had enabled her to focus on what she really wanted to do with her life and valued the opportunity to do relevant training: *'I know more what I'm interested in now...I know where I want to focus.'*

Parents also valued the fact that they had gained organisational and IT skills.

## **What have Professionals gained from the experience?**

Despite parents feeling that they are not always being listened to, professionals viewed their presence on the Board as a great success in a number of ways. It has changed their perspective on how they deliver services:

*'It's been a very interesting and enjoyable as well as a challenging time really , it's been a benefit, especially in reviewing how we're looking at services across the board. I think you always feel if you've been working with families you maybe feel that you actually know what some of the issues are and I think I've gained from thinking actually I didn't know what all the issues were and they've been able to express that in a different environment which has been quite meaningful for them and for us.'*

Parents have influenced priorities and have been a major influence both in implementing policy and changing working practices, especially with regard to the NHS PCT:

*'Their views were actually very important in influencing us to go down the line of putting those two posts together at that time to create the midwife role. The health visitors who are working in the Sure Start area have all been networked in from the beginning. So that we're trying to promote, you know, an integration and change as we go along and that is now networked into both the management structure in terms of [the Health Co-ordinator's] role and the wider framework, as far as we can take it.'*

The professionals think parents have found it a very enjoyable experience, as well.

*'They've enjoyed it and they've got some self-esteem out of it. I think lots of things have worked well. They've been involved and they've seen the project grow and the new building's coming on board and it's their community. So in a way, that reflects the success of some of the work.. We may have some weaknesses but some of the strengths are that people want to stay engaged.'*

Involving parents on the Board has been a steep learning curve for some agencies and, for some it has been an extremely stimulating experience. The experience of working with parents has had a profound effect on the working practices in the NHS Trust:

*'I see my own Manager and I see how she's.. she's comes alive when she's with parents. She's learnt a lot and it's really helped her to be more flexible and to be in touch with people in a way that she wouldn't in a senior management position. The language she uses.. it's about translating that into services right across the Trust. I think that if she had not been with parents and seen the difference it's made to them and to sure Start having them involved, she wouldn't have wanted to embrace Sure Start as she has done. But she's applied it ... Sure Start is spread right across the Trust and that's interesting and I think part of that is about her direct involvement with parents.'*

## **What is the current strategy for increasing involvement on the Board?**

The Parents Forum was specifically set up to encourage new parents involvement in the governance of the Sure Start, Littlehampton programme. At the time of the evaluation it had been running for about 18 months. It is a 'drop-in' which is held monthly and is generally led by members of the Family Support team. Creche facilities are provided but the places are limited and need to be booked in advance. It was intended that the forum would be '*the driver of everything.*' The original intention was that it should be an open forum, giving parents a 'voice', an opportunity for information sharing and gathering, and for them to meet and support other parents. It was hoped that new parents would become interested in getting involved in running the programme and that it would therefore provide a continual pool of new and enthusiastic parents who would be willing to be nominated for standing for the Board. However, for one reason or another, new parents are not attending and so it has turned more into a 'support group' for Board parents to get together and let off steam:

*'We chat, if there is a particular subject to be discussed then that what we do, if not, then it's just a meeting for us to get together to have a chat and let off steam, have a moan. A lot of it is personal. Because we're all friends, we all know each other so it's a chance for us to sort of discuss personal issues. And we know that it's not going to go any further.'*

Some parents really enjoy going to the Forum and find it more fun than attending Board meetings. However, a number of Board parents have stopped going: one parent objected to the rules that had been imposed on the group; several parents object to the '*bitching*', '*back-chatting*' and '*sniping*' that goes on amongst the parents and professionals. It appears that some parents have become quite dominant and often there are quarrels. Some parents feel they are caught up in the middle with the others nagging them to side with them. One parent felt this was a real barrier to new parents: '*If they came to one of our forums they'd be put off for life.*'

Again, it was felt that lack of crèche places and the fact these have to be booked in advance had prevented new parents attending: '*I think it's 'cos they can't get the children in the crèche that they don't actually attend.*'

Language was perceived as a barrier. A new Portuguese parent has started attending the Forum but because of the language difficulty, few of the parents had communicated with her.

The professionals acknowledged that being on the Board is probably the '*least attractive*' area of work for parents to be involved in and they are concerned at the lack of new parents who are willing to become involved. The Forum has not worked as a strategy for increasing parental involvement. It was suggested that it needs to be more interesting, attractive and there need to be fun events :

*'We need more light touch events, more fun things, more days out. Once you engage with the staff on a fun day out, then you've got a chance of persuading them perhaps to come along to the forum and then from the forum feeding into the services...that was how I saw the forum working.'*

## What are the barriers to parental involvement?

### What do the professionals think?

Some professionals feel there is a lot of confusion still about what Sure Start is actually about and that there has not been enough promotion of the programme. It's not just confusing for parents but also for the professionals themselves:

*'I think they are quite muddled as to what it's all about. It's a programme, not a building. It's taken me so long to understand Sure Start, the way it functions, the different Boards, the different responsibilities, how the Accountable Body and the PCT how they all work together.'*

Some professionals working within the programme acknowledge that they lack the skills to be effective in involving parents. Parents may not know enough about what is expected in the role of Board member and may not be encouraged enough to become involved.

*'We need to be better at explaining what's involved, what influence they have, what's in it for them. You need to facilitate a group – any other group work we do we facilitate – you need to have group skills.. ..people don't function as a team without some work being put in.'*

One professional identified what was defined as a 'voluntary' barrier, the fact that some parents think it is the professionals job, and not the parents role to be involved in running the programme: *'That's what **you're** paid for.'*

Professionals identified parents general low self-esteem and lack of confidence as a potential barrier. It was suggest that some parents are so low in their self-esteem and confidence: *'it's difficult even to get them out of the house, let alone to meetings'*. Parents also lack the belief that their 'voice' will be heard

Another barrier they identified was 'accessibility': the timing and length of meetings may make it difficult for parents to be involved. Professionals also thought that the commitment of time involved was a barrier, when parents may need their spare time for other things such as leisure activities or earning money. They felt that the formal approach to meetings, especially, the amount of paperwork involved, might deter parents who may not have good reading or interpersonal skills.

Professionals expressed some concern was that the existing parents may be acting as a barrier. They have become a close-knit group and new parents could feel quite 'daunted' and 'intimidated'. It could appear that the parents on the Board: *'are the people that are listened to and their voice that is important and there's no space for anyone else in the group.'*

The present Board members should represent the 'voice' of the Sure Start community and should be encouraging other parents to become involved. They should be a visible presence so that other parents can voice any concerns and also ask them about their experiences of being Board members. However, professionals doubted that other Sure Start parents even knew which parents are on the Board.

There was a perception that some parents may be slightly threatened by the idea of new parents becoming involved on the Board. Most of the parents on the Board are a strong group who have been involved from the outset of the programme. They were involved in making all the key decisions, about what the programme should look like, and how things should be run. They have a feeling of 'ownership' and see it as their 'territory'. They have

become part of the Sure Start family, and for many it has become part of their identity. For some, having new parents coming in who may have a new and different agenda, and who challenge the *status quo* could be perceived as quite threatening to them, personally. Some parents may find the idea of relinquishing their position of power, very frightening.

Professionals also thought that there may be some stigma about being involved in the programme. Some potential Sure Start Parents from other areas of the town might not wish to be seen to be associated with this particular group of parents because of estate rivalries.

## **What do parents think?**

One of the biggest barriers identified by parents, is the amount of time that being on the Board entails. One parent spoke of spending *'hundred and hundreds of hours'*, whilst others said that they spent between one and three days a week on Board business.

*'If there's a lot of meetings quite close together it feel it's taking over your life and you haven't got time for your own personal things. There seems to be Sure Start twenty-four hours a day.'*

Some parents felt that the commitment they gave to the programme had caused some resentment from family members: This had caused a certain amount of guilt: *'I'm not doing things indoors and he'll moan that something's untidy.'*

The timing of meetings was also identified as being a barrier to involvement: meetings do not always fit in with the schedules of a new baby or for mother with school pick-up times. Sometimes, this can be frustrating:

*'It's been quite hard because the meetings finish at the same time as the nursery pick-ups which has been a nightmare most of the time because I have to leave half an hour earlier so I miss the conclusion of the meetings which can be quite annoying.'*

Parents did recognise that others might perceive parent Board members as a bit *'cliquey'*. They acknowledge that they may appear *'a bit unfriendly'* and that this may be difficult for others to get involved at Board level.

*'There's a core group who all know each other...and trying to get someone new to come into that can be difficult unless they are a very strong character and just barge their way in – it's just that we know each other so we talk about things we know about.'*

However, they are aware that without new parents the programme will not grow and that they need to make more effort to make others feel welcome.

Some felt that lack of knowledge about who is involved and what being a Board member means, may be a barrier. *'some mums in my group, they wouldn't know who the Board parents were – if you put their faces about, other parents would know who to chat to.'*

There was also a feeling that there is little guidance about what their role entails and they, themselves, are often unsure of what they should be doing.

*'People don't really know what's expected. There are still times when I don't know what is expected of me...There are a lot of unknowns about what you are supposed to do and what you should be getting involved in or what you can get involved in. I feel a bit unguided'*

They also thought that many parents may find it difficult to work alongside professionals because they lack confidence and expertise: *'We're just parents and they're all professionals.'*

Whilst parents may be happy to be involved in other ways, getting them involved in the governance may be difficult because it is not perceived as 'fun' and, they might find it too boring: *'They're no fun. The problem I think is the jump from doing the fun stuff to like going to Board Meetings, which are deadly.'*

Another barrier to involvement may be the lack of crèche facilities. Although there are 545 families registered with the programme there are only ten crèche places available and these need to be booked in advance: *'I think it's mainly 'cos they can't get the children in the crèche that they don't actually attend.'*

There are no parents from minority groups represented on the Board. Parents thought work prevented most fathers from becoming involved and that language barriers prevented parents from ethnic minorities. There was, also, a hint of prejudice: *'I'm not sure that they would be welcome with open arms as such, but nothing would be said to them it would just be a kind of...'*

Regarding barrier to parental involvement in the programme generally, a number of other factors were mentioned. There were concerns, for instance, that many parents, as well as other parents and professionals on the Board, are unaware about what exactly the Littlehampton Sure Start programme offers and how they can become involved.

Some parents felt that Sure Start has no real focal point at present. The present building has a creche, a parents' room and an Information Shop, which is a small room at the front of the building. This is the point of access. Parents commented that the fact that the Shop is generally crowded, very busy and feels a bit chaotic. This may be quite intimidating for many new parents.

It was also felt that if new parents do come along, they often feel pressurised by staff to get involved: *'It's quite daunting to come into here in the first place and then to be kind of said 'oh I want you all to attend a meeting.'*

Although Sure Start has been running for two years now, parents felt that many people living in the area are still unaware of it or, are unsure about its purpose. There is still a lot of suspicion and misconception about Sure Start and it was felt this was because the initial contact is generally made through the Health Visitors.

*'There is probably a stigma with the health visitors 'cos it is based around health and I think parents with deprived children think they're interfering...they think that if the health visitors walk into the house they're going to be nosy. I think it's all to do with Health and because it's perceive through health visitors they think its health...'*

It was also felt that there is still some stigma about it being for deprived families. One parent had assumed that it was for children with behavioural problems:

*'When I first got involved I assumed it was because I had children with behavioural problems and I couldn't cope. And that was what I assumed it was, that's the only reason I got involved.'*

Some parents felt there is a 'culture' in Littlehampton and they perceived that people in the Littlehampton area are generally quite apathetic and suspicious of new initiatives. In the

Wick area, there is quite a feeling of resentment against Sure Start because the Wick Chapel, which housed a playgroup, has been knocked down to make way for the new Childrens' Centre building.

Distance and lack of communication were also thought to be barriers to involvement especially in the Wick area. For parents without transport, it can take as long as 25 minutes to walk to the Sure Start building. They also thought that many parents living in the Wick area already have a lot of support from amongst their own groups of friends and relatives, and therefore do not feel the need to be involved.

Parents felt other parents may not want to become involved because there is quite a bit of scepticism about how much Sure Start will achieve and they are not prepared to get involved: *'they don't see the point of putting in those hours just to kind of have it fall on its face.'*

## **What difference will the Childrens' Centre make?**

There were mixed views about Childrens' Centre. Some were very optimistic whilst others were concerned about it.

Despite her disillusionment about the programme one parent saw it as her reason for staying involved: *'That's what I'm hanging on for, hanging on to.. the fact that I believe when it becomes the children centre it will be better.'*

Some thought extending the area was a very positive move as it would provide far more clarity for other professionals and parents, and the new building would provide a central focal point.

There was also optimism that it would provide a much *'wider net'* of potential parents with different abilities and skills to offer: *'...parents who are more articulate and may have developed skills through their sort of occupation.'*

However, a number of concerns were also expressed:

There was concern from some professionals that the actual title 'Childrens' Centre' could be confusing. It was suggested that the *'badging'* or *'marketing'* of the Centre needs to be carefully thought through.

*'I think the actual title is confusing because people think the Childrens' Centre is a building and it's not. People assume it's a place, and it's not, it's actually a programme and that is very hard for people to understand...the impression given is that if it's seen as a Childrens' Centre, people will think, I can't go in there it's for children only'.. I think it's an unhelpful name for the programme. It's just terminology, how things can be misrepresented.. even the press it's so easy for them to understand the wrong way round.'*

The concern is that the Childrens' Centre will cause confusion not only to the public but also amongst staff. One professional expressed her own confusion about how the constant changes in policy have been difficult to grasp:

*'I think everyone will become confused all over again about what it all means because Sure Start is already used differently now than it was when I joined. Sure Start has become the government overall Early Years services as far as I can tell. I'm actually working within education and within Early*

*Years and yet I'm still very unclear about the structure and the hierarchy of the departments and I think the Children's Centre is just adding another layer of confusion. I think it just means it's a place – a building, rather than a concept, a virtual centre.'*

There was a real concern from some professionals that extending the area would stretch the resources of the Sure Start staff and that all the good work of the past two years may be lost.

*'I think it will require twice the amount of work, twice the amount of recording and evaluating than before for pretty much no extra cash. My concern is that when you do that you end up with essentially a poorer service. Everyone's worse off for it.. all the effort and all the enthusiasm that's gone on the last two years, it may be hard to sustain it over a wider area...either we'll end up with a thinner layer of everything across a bigger area, or we'll end up with people saying 'well let's just carry on doing what we know best' which is the area we first started with and the expanded area will then lose out on it's potential ability to get involved with things that are available.'*

There was also a concern that the location of the new Childrens' Centre nursery will not be easy for the 'hard to reach' to access because they may feel stigmatised: *'Now, though, the people from Wick will have a problem, the people from nicer areas will make use of that nursery. It's a bit like 'oh it's our nursery'*

## **Are there any practical suggestions to increase involvement?**

Both professionals and parents were asked whether or not they had any practical suggestions for increasing parental involvement.

Professionals suggested:

- continually demonstrate that we value their input
- a tangible reward mechanism
- raise the profile of Sure Start/Children's Centre

*'I don't think it's really understood how much work needs to be done to raise the profile of a new idea. The town knows about Sure Start. A lot of them will know about the new building but very few recognise it as a whole area, and I think it's still thought of as quite a local area – just the River Ham, kind of stretch'.*

- better publicity regarding involvement – a slip about involvement included in the Welcome Pack
- give Board members a higher profile e.g. making them street representatives

*'If you said, you're the representative for this street, it might actually be an idea that would make more sense to them. Because at the moment they are represented as an amorphous group many of whom they don't know even. If we turn them into street representatives, that might create greater ownership and at the same time encourage other people to see themselves as potential successors.'*

- more light touch, fun-type activities e.g. trips, events

One of the Voluntary Agencies represented on the Board organises 'fun weekends'. Parents volunteer to undertake training so that they can be responsible for certain activities. It involves a lot of peer work and mentoring

The parents also made a number of practical suggestions:

- More outside activities.
- Encouragement through word of mouth - parents encouraging other parents
- Using parents on the Board as ambassadors
- Have a suggestions box in the office
- New flyers for Board members recruiting at all Sure Start groups/events – making it look exciting
- Inviting parents to come along to a pre-board or Board meeting
- One off mornings where parents from the Board are available to talk to
- Involving parents in more little groups like the Breast Forum
- Making people feel welcomed by the team
- Placing a noticeboard in the Wick area
- The Parents Forum should promote the message that it's relevant to all parents: *'You don't have to be a part of a small group or have been in Sure Start for a certain length of time, that their contribution is as valuable as anybody else's.'*

## **Are there any models of 'good practice' in involvement?**

Within Littlehampton Sure Start there are a number of successful examples of good parental involvement. The fact that the Board parents have remained, does demonstrate that, despite the frustrations, they are fully committed to remaining involved with the programme.

This current evaluation included a focus group held with six member of MILK. MILK is a parent-led 'drop-in' group which promotes and supports breastfeeding. It was started by the Sure Start Midwife, *'the godmother'*, of the group and is chaired by a parent. The group started in the late Autumn 2003. It is a group which meets weekly with the purpose of setting up promotional activities to raise the awareness of breastfeeding in the community. At the time of the evaluation, the group had just held a Breastfeeding Awareness week which they had been responsible for organising. This had been the focus of all their efforts and energy since the group had started.

*'We had a mission because we wanted to plan this Breastfeeding Awareness week, so we knew that we had goals and we had things that we had to achieve and it was just... setting an agenda...and just getting things done. And people knowing that they had different things that they had to do.. there's quite a few people who are really good at facilitating and making things happen and stuff so, yes, just asking people to volunteer their time..'*

The group is very informal and parents are invited along and to get involved as much as they feel they are able to. Because the group has a clearly defined goal, they are enthusiastic and full of ideas:

*'We've talked about starting a baby café. We've talked about getting new mums in with new babies and trying to recruit through the midwives. .the group is still a very young group and evolving.. we're trying to take it into the school.. as part of the reception year curriculum.'*

The parents felt that they had been a very productive group: *'we had a high profile, it's been one of the positive groups'*. They hope that their achievements are valued by the programme but they were not sure to what extent their contribution has been recognised.

They all spoke about what they had gained from being involved in the group. The main gain had been friendship and support. Some mentioned the fact that it had enhanced their organisational skills. Some spoke about how they now felt '*part of something*', it had given them an interest, but most of all they felt good about doing something for the community:

*'It's nice to be able to give something back to the community, to feel that you are making friends and enjoying yourself but also that we're doing something good and positive as opposed to just sitting around drinking a cup of coffee.'*

The group was asked if they thought parents should be rewarded. Like the parents on the Board, the parents felt that their rewards were intrinsic:

*'I don't need to be rewarded because, the satisfaction I get from it or just feeling that I have achieved something is a huge reward.. you're not just a mum, you're actually doing more than just taking care of your child.'*

However, one parent did suggest that professionals need to be careful not to exploit parents' goodwill and they did point out breastfeeding peer supporters are paid in some parts of the country. A view was expressed, however, was that if people are paid, it could change the dynamic because others might be vying for the position. There was also the view that sometimes people do perform better if they are paid because '*they're more committed*'. One parent, however, whilst being happy to be a volunteer, did think that payment could sometimes be an incentive:

*'It could be really positive for some people to get some kind of payment...for some people who maybe have never been employed before, they've never had a job, they've never done something they're really interested in or something they feel passionate about and they're actually getting paid for it. so it could be a good thing.'*

Some of the group had enjoyed their experience of parental involvement so much that they would like to get more involved in the future so long as the involvement has relevance:

*'They want to poach us for the Parents Forum and I just think it's if people have time and if they're interested. The thing with the MILK and the Breastfeeding Forum is that it's really, really relevant to my life at the moment, you know and it suits the timing because I have an older child in school.'*

Another example of successful parental involvement has been the involvement of a parent in the evaluation process. The parent has been motivated by the enthusiasm of a member of the Staff team who has supported her throughout. She has been engaged in planning a project, taught the necessary skills to carry out interviews, to run a focus group, and has been invited to evaluation conferences. She has also contributed to writing the final report which bears her name. Her involvement has been successful because she feels she has achieved something worthwhile, that the findings have been useful in shaping the service and that she has gained confidence and enthusiasm through praise and encouragement.

A further 'good model' of successful involvement is the Aerobics Class. Although it is not an example of parental involvement in terms of involvement in running the programme, it does illustrate what helps parents to become involved, generally. Parents joined the class because they were motivated, other parents had displayed enthusiasm, because the team worked well together and parents were treated as equals. Perhaps the main factor why it was so successful, is that it was a fairly small group in which parents were made to feel comfortable and were set achievable goals. Above all, the staff were perceived as very welcoming:

*'At the Aerobics...we're seeing so many new people,.. new faces,.. they all say you're made to feel welcomed there by the team, by the instructor, by Jane, by everybody.. so they want to come back and they also want to bring their friends back.'*

These examples have demonstrated useful learning points regarding successful involvement.

- professionals and peers must transmit enthusiasm and give positive encouragement
- it must be fun
- parents must be made to feel welcome
- parents must feel valued and continually appreciated. Any reward must be of value to them
- it must be relevant
- parents prefer 'time limited' or ad hoc involvement
- there must be clear objectives and achievable goals
- parents must feel a sense of achievement
- there must be a sense of 'ownership'
- parents like to be treated as 'equals'
- parents must not feel pressurised or exploited
- parents should be given continual on-going support

## Conclusion

This evaluation has demonstrated that Littlehampton Sure Start has been very successful in involving parents in the running of the programme but the 'high level' involvement the Programme Manager aspires to, has not yet been achieved: *'there's still a long way to go'*. However, for those parents who have been involved, and for the professionals working alongside them, it has been a very positive experience. Parents have got a 'voice' on the Board and many of the professionals have embraced and enjoyed the challenge it has presented in terms of 'inclusion' strategies. Parents have demonstrated tremendous commitment and good will, whilst many of the professionals, especially those on the staff team, have shown that they are working extremely hard to ensure parents are as fully involved as possible.

Evidence from this evaluation has shown that parental involvement is far from easy and its complexity may have been underestimated. Parental involvement at the level aspired to by the Littlehampton Sure Start is challenging and evidently much harder work than was anticipated, as it is an entirely new way of working. Both professionals and parents are in agreement that parents are paramount to the development of the project and there is therefore much concern that the current strategy to increase parental involvement on the Board, *vis-a-vis* the Parents' Forum seems not to be working. Evidence also shows that 'capacity building' in terms of training and mentoring for parents on the Board, is limited.

A number of tensions/dilemmas have been highlighted by the evaluation:

### **New Parents v Existing Parents**

It is clear that, while a number of committed parents have been successfully engaged, and their engagement sustained, they have now – perhaps inevitably - formed something of a 'clique', making it difficult for others to join. It is clear that a constant cycle of engagement and some alternative strategies for getting new parents on the Board need to be developed.

Interviewees have suggested that roles may need to be more clearly defined and a greater sense of 'ownership' could be encouraged by giving parents specific roles relating to their interests and strengths. Professionals are aware of needing to invest time in helping parents to identify their skills, strengths and weaknesses: *'it's about slotting them in in a way that's productive so that they're supported and nurtured and then they might move on through the project to do other things depending on their time commitments'*. This applies equally to new parents and to those who are currently involved. This may enable some parents to develop sufficiently so that they can 'move on' and make way for new parents, without losing their enthusiasm or valuable experience.

### **The Childrens' Centre**

Whilst offering a wider range of parents with differing levels of abilities and skills on which to draw from, the new Childrens' Centre will present a challenge to professionals as it will require different types of support. New parents will need to be supported in terms of building their capacity to enable them to be fully involved at the level they wish to be. Those parents, already involved, will need supporting so that they can move into new roles e.g. setting-up and running groups themselves.

*I think for us the challenge is that they (those already on Board) don't become the louder voice. It would be easier to work with those parents in a traditional sort of sense, and you know, we can use their skills because they'll be able to set up groups themselves...it's a different type of support that they'll need. I think it's about us having the skills to be inclusive, to be able to be flexible enough to*

*work with a range of parents and to ensure that we don't let the more articulate parents outshine the others*

### **Parents as 'Parents' v Parents as 'Volunteers'**

The commitment of parents on the Board can be very onerous and, clearly, many parents are putting an enormous amount of time into being involved. The fact that they initially engaged with Sure Start in order to gain support for themselves **as parents**, must therefore not be overlooked. Several interviewees – both parents and professionals - expressed concern that on occasion children and families were being neglected by parents in order to fulfil the demands of being a Sure Start Board member. Clearly, a happy medium needs to be found.

### **Parent as Chair**

It is evident that, whilst the majority of professionals and parents thought a parent Chair to be the 'ideal', concerns were expressed as to whether or not capacity building had been sufficient at this stage to facilitate this. Several interviewees were concerned about the best ways of providing appropriate support to a parent Chair. There were also a number of issues raised concerning which agency should be responsible for undertaking any training/mentoring. At the time of the evaluation, many issues were yet to be resolved.

### **Valuing/Rewarding Parents**

One of the most important learning points in sustaining parental involvement is that parents need to feel valued and have their efforts appreciated. Various systems of informal and formal 'appreciation' and reward were discussed, and some had also been tried out in practice. There was no clear consensus among interviewees about what was the best system. Nevertheless, it is vital that parents' 'voice' is listened to in discussions concerning the issue of parental rewards, as a reward system which is imposed and which is perceived to be unfair, may be detrimental to involvement and hence ultimately counter-productive.

## **Recommendations:**

### **New Strategy:**

Parental involvement, as one professional put it '*is a project in itself*'. If parental involvement is to be taken to the 'high level' aspired to by the programme, it is clear that both parents and professionals need to be engaged in planning a new and ongoing strategy.

It is clear that Parental involvement needs to be more 'inclusive'. The parents who are currently 'involved' are all women and strategies need to be thought through as to how to address the balance. Although one father was apparently involved for a short time, despite receiving support, it is said that he had found the experience quite isolating and intimidating. One suggestion was that regular 'one off' focus groups should be held rather than expecting working fathers to undertake any heavy commitment. Strategies also need to be put in place to encourage members from the Portuguese, and other minority communities, to become involved. One professional was honest enough to acknowledge that he was not even aware that there was a Portuguese community in the Littlehampton Sure Start area: *'It's terrible isn't it? I just wasn't aware.'*

### **Training:**

Parental Involvement takes a tremendous amount of hard work, time, effort, and commitment from staff and parents. If parents are to be involved in engaging other parents, they may need to acquire a number of key skills such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, assertiveness skills. Some may also need training in managing personal feelings in

order that they remain objective. However, it is important that parents, themselves, are helped to identify their training needs rather than having training imposed on them. Professionals may also require relevant training in engaging and mentoring parents.

**Structured Approach:**

A more structured approach may be needed. Evidence shows that parents are motivated in becoming involved when the involvement is relevant. Professionals need to invest time in finding out what interest and motivates individual parents because if they have a good experience of involvement in one area, they may be willing to become involved elsewhere. Parents may need to be involved in small ways to start with and some parents may wish only to be involved on an *ad hoc* basis. A variety of different models and levels of involvement should therefore be made available. Parents should not feel pressurised by staff to become involved but be able to be involved at a level they feel comfortable with and they may need some 'professional' input to find this level.

**Engaging Parents:**

Involvement has been successful when it has come through fun-type activities: *It's important not to be seen as health targets and educational targets but that it can be good fun – working together...* The initial recruitment of parents to the programme has been through fun events, such as the Festival of Wick, where parents were approached by members of staff who encouraged them to come and told them about how they could be involved and influence changes to the Sure Start programme.

**Parents as Ambassadors:**

Word of mouth amongst parents has been shown to a very effective way in increasing participation and peer support groups have been very successful in encouraging new parents into the programme. Given the reported *stigma* about Sure Start arising from its perceived link with Health Visiting, perhaps greater use could be made of peer supporters in engaging parents e.g. the Breastfeeding Support group.

**Childcare:**

Childcare is identified as a major barrier to parental involvement and, it is hoped that the Children's Centre may offer the much needed crèche facilities which may then encourage more parents to become involved.

## **Appendix 1: Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions for Members of the Board**

1. What is your name/title/role
2. Who are you employed by
3. How does your organisation fit into the running of Sure Start
4. What is your understanding of Sure Start as a programme?
5. How did you become involved as a Board member
6. How long have you been a member of the Board
7. Do you attend meetings regularly
8. What do you understand by the term 'parental involvement'?
9. What proportion of parents are on the Board?
10. What would you say they contribute to the Board?
11. Would you say their contribution is valued?
12. What, if any, are the barriers, to their involvement
13. Do you feel comfortable about having parents on the Board?
14. Would you say that there are any difficulties encountered?
15. How can we encourage future involvement?

### **Interview Questions for Staff Members**

1. What is your name/title/role?
2. Who are you employed by?
3. How does your organisation fit into the running of Sure Start?
4. What is your understanding of Sure Start as a programme?
5. Why did you become involved in Sure Start?
6. How long have you been working for Sure Start?
7. What do you understand by the term 'parental involvement'?
8. To what extent do you feel parents should be involved?
9. What would you say they contribute?
10. How is their contribution perceived/valued by other parents/staff/Board members?
11. What, if any, are the barriers, to their involvement?
12. What, if any, are the difficulties encountered in parental involvement?
13. How can we encourage future involvement?

### **Interview Questions for Parent Members of the Board** (See Pre-Interview Questionnaire below)

1. What do you understand Sure Start to be about?
2. How did it feel for you when you first become involved?
3. How did your family/friends/members of staff react to you becoming involved?
4. Could you describe to me how you are involved, i.e. what sort of things do you do?
5. Do you feel that what you have to say is valued by other parents/Board Members/Staff
6. Parental involvement can mean a number of things, how involved do you think parents should be?
7. How do you feel you should be rewarded for your involvement?
8. What do you feel you have gained personally from becoming involved?
9. What do you think may prevent other parents from becoming involved?
10. How could Sure Start improve parental involvement

## Appendix 2: Letter Confirming Parent Board Member Interviews

6<sup>th</sup> May 2004

Dear

### Re: Evaluation- Parental Involvement

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed on ..... If for any reason you are unable to make this interview please could you call me on xxxxxxxxxxxx

The interview will be held at the Dairy in the Parents' Room. And space will be provided for your child in the crèche.

I would like to record the interview, so that I have an accurate record of what you say. Please indicate below if you object to this. The interview is strictly confidential and your name will not appear in my report or be attached to any quotes used.

As the time allotted is only 30 minutes, it is important that we keep the interview focussed. I would be grateful, therefore, if you would look at the issues(shown below) I would like to explore so that you can start thinking about what you would like to say.

1. Your feelings about your involvement e.g. time/commitment/reward etc
2. Your experience of involvement i.e. how you feel your role is perceived by: self/partners/other parents/staff/other Board members etc.
3. Perceived benefits from involvement i.e. personal gains/expectations
4. Difficulties/barriers to involvement
5. The future – appropriateness of involvement i.e. to what level; Ideas for encouraging other parents to be involved
6. Your needs

Yours sincerely,

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### EVALUATION OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN LITTLEHAMPTON SURE START

I \*agree/do not agree to taking part in the evaluation *\*(please delete as appropriate)*

I do not wish for my interview to be recorded *(please tick if appropriate):*

Signature: ..... Print Name: .....

Please bring this slip with you to the interview.