

SURE START ON THE OCEAN

DEVELOPING A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

1. Introduction

1.1 This is the final paper setting out how Sure Start On The Ocean can develop a practical framework for evaluation. It follows an initial paper last September and a further discussion paper in February. Both papers were circulated to all members of the Sure Start Board and Sure Start projects and have been well received. A wide range of discussions have been held with Sure Start Board members, Sure Start supported projects and Sure Start staff as part of the process of developing these papers. All these papers have been written by Hilary Barnard, an external independent consultant.

1.2 The paper considers recent progress, issues for attention, use of balanced scorecard in local evaluation, next steps in local evaluation, key performance indicators, recommendations and conclusions for the Sure Start Board. Questions presented in consultation are provided in an annex. It is understood that this paper will form an integral part of the brief to consultants to support and undertake the local evaluation of Sure Start.

2. Importance of local evaluation

2.1 A number of key themes were highlighted in the September paper. It indicated that local evaluation was particularly important to:

- Address the very varied needs of Under 4s and their families on The Ocean to give those children a better start in life

- Show the difference that Sure Start is making to the lives and nurturing responsibilities of those families
- Ensure effective accountability of funded projects to Sure Start and its Board, a key accountability for public funds
- Guarantee delivery consistent with the partnership development and values of Sure Start
- Assist the learning within projects about how to do better
- Focus on how Sure Start can best support projects and enable them to succeed
- Ensure a more integrated approach to evaluation
- Make the links with wider regeneration and renewal initiatives to ensure that work with Under 4s gets maximum benefit from these funding sources.

2.2 From discussion of the September paper and this paper in earlier versions, it is clear that power issues of gender, race and social class are important influences in Sure Start's work. Local evaluation should ensure that consideration of these far reaching issues are fully integrated.

3. Recent progress

3.1 There has been some real progress in Sure Start On The Ocean evaluation and measurement over the last six months:

- Projects consulted and contributing to the outcome of the September paper
- A workshop was held led by Sabes to explain Sure Start needs and to enable greater understanding of what was involved.
- Project staff have started to develop clearer indicators for measuring performance
- The grid form for project proposals has proved useful in helping shape responses and identifies areas for improvement in local evaluation.
- Being able to start to benchmark Sure Start projects is a very important step forward.
- Projects and Board members receiving and being able to consider the February 2002 discussion paper

- Board review of the discussion paper and suggested key performance indicators at its special meeting on 14 March 2002

4. Issues for attention

- 4.1 Getting evaluation right is an extended process for many organisations and partnerships. All project proposals for work April 2002 – March 2004 have been reviewed by the independent consultant on the basis of their contribution to local evaluation of Sure Start. It is recognised that some points made below may be addressed in other project documents or be spoken rather than written intentions. However, the project proposal document was clearly the key document setting out the framework for local evaluation. It has to be a core document in local evaluation of Sure Start.
- 4.2 It is important to see the list below as constructive comments and criticism designed to mark out areas for improvement. Those below apply to several projects (though not necessarily all):
- **Engaging communities.** Contribution to strengthening the community is rather limited in project proposals. It may be that that this dimension appears to go without saying but projects do need to define their contribution to community development. Community knowledge and understanding of Sure Start needs to be enhanced. Projects have a responsibility to educate the community about Sure Start.
 - **Influencing local skills and developments around parenting.** Some projects are clearly concerned to influence local skills and developments around parenting. The proposals could be strengthened by practical measures projects are using to assess this progress.
 - **Service user voice.** The user/customer perspective gets limited consideration in many proposals. When this perspective does appear in project proposals, it tends to be considered primarily on the terms of the professional or the staff member. Sure Start appears at an early stage with customer/user led evaluation.

- **Mainstreaming.** Steps to mainstream Sure Start work are strongly linked to the long-term impact and sustainability of the work undertaken and approaches adopted by projects. Mainstreaming does not feature as a significant dimension in many project proposals. Based on reading the project proposals, projects should be generally clearer about the ways that they are ensuring the sustainability of their work.
- **Changing work practices** as part of Sure Start work get little mention. Projects appear to need more encouragement to set out the re-evaluation of work and professional practices taking place as a result of Sure Start.
- **Evidence base.** There is much text that appears promotional rather than evaluative asserting compliance with Sure Start objectives rather than evidencing it.
- **Collaborations.** Evidence of collaboration (e.g. liaison, referrals) with other organisations to provide joined up services under the umbrella of the Sure Start programme appears to be understated. Evidence of integrated working is not very evident – perhaps another understatement.
- **Missing key responses.** There are a few projects that have not provided the indicators sought in the form.
- **Information sources** are vital in any process of evaluation. Some projects hardly mention existing data and information that will support project evaluation. Improved access to appropriate software and computing resources would no doubt assist in managing information but manual and hard copy records can still provide an essential resource for tracking project progress.
- **Quality.** Although covered in the workshop run by Sabes, there is still work to be done on getting the right balance between qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitative criteria for measurement used in many project proposals tend to have a broad national character rather than

something more immediate to the demands of the area. Quantitative measures are more concrete.

- **Accountability.** Clearly some organisations have drawn on help from Sabes in devising performance measures. Meeting any specific requirements of the Sure Start Board is not mentioned.

- **Consistency in evaluation** needs to be achieved in some areas. There are indications that some projects prefer to use the evaluative frameworks of their parent organisations in preference to the framework provided by Sure Start. Their evaluative frameworks may help in providing some information but it is important that there is a consistent picture of performance across all projects.

- **Staff development.** There are a number of indicators that staff skills in measurement are not strong or are directed to an evaluation framework that does not entirely fit Sure Start objectives.

4.3 **Consequences.** The points identified in 4.2 above are prime areas for local evaluation. They underline the importance of establishing an effective evaluation system. This system will no doubt be added to as time and experience progresses. It is essential to develop a framework of indicators around the areas identified in 4.2 to support local evaluation of projects. The indicators should be clearly linked to changing and changed practice.

Note: Feedback from Hilary Barnard on individual project proposals remains available on a confidential 1:1 basis for individual projects that have not so far taken advantage of it.

5. **Helpful tools in evaluation: the balanced scorecard**

5.1 In order to help support a stronger emphasis on user/customers in measurement, it is recommended that Sure Start as a partnership uses a balanced scorecard method to evaluate projects. The balanced scorecard is

an established tool in performance measurement. Projects themselves may well want to learn about the method and should be supported to do so.

5.2 The balanced scorecard centres on customer/user satisfaction, organisational capacity/processes, value for money and innovation/organisational learning.

The balanced scorecard:

- aligns strategic vision and its implementation through understanding how customers/users view project performance
- builds on comparisons between projects.
- assists both development (e.g. linking management and organisation learning to continuous improvement) and delivery (e.g. securing and sustaining high performance over time).
- focuses attention on the value being delivered by projects and any gaps that there might be in expectations and project direction.
- highlights efforts being made to improve performance and to innovate.

5.3 It is an important tool in defining agreed actions, establishing a manageable set of appropriate performance measures and ensuring that tension between different goals is creative and positive for the communities being served. It is a key tool in helping to ensure value for money and proper accountability for public funds.

5.4 The Board review session on 14 March 2002 considered these points on the balanced scorecard and agreed to pursue use of the balanced scorecard within local evaluation of Sure Start.

6. Next steps in local evaluation

6.1 Addressing the issues will take varied amounts of time. Several steps are identified below as part of an action programme:

- **Cluster development.** A cluster group of projects should be developed based on each of the four main Sure Start objectives. Clusters should be highly participative learning groups encouraging collaboration and internal benchmarking between projects. Clusters should be an important mechanism for promoting relations within the local community.

Participation in clusters should form an integral part of projects' accountability to Sure Start as a whole. A training resource/workshop should be provided to support each cluster's work on measurement. Clusters can help with providing more feedback from Sure Start Board and Co-ordinator. The effectiveness of cluster development should be evaluated by at least six monthly reports to the Board.

- **Thematic development.** More periodic evaluation of specific themes could run alongside cluster development. One set of themes might, for example, be work with 0-1s and their parents/carers, work with 1-2s and their parents/carers and work with 2-4s and their parents. Choice of themes should be influenced by an action research philosophy enabling Sure Start to undertake small pieces of important research.
- **Change practice.** Evidence should be provided on how organisational practice has and will change.
- **Community development.** Community learning/development is given more emphasis and that projects and clusters are assisted to see what this may involve. The development of the Parents' Forum is considered to be an important element in Sure Start contribution and engagement with community development.
- **Public accountability.** Accountability of projects to Sure Start exists on both an individual and a cluster basis. Individual project accountability remains important particularly in capturing relevant data and information. Wherever possible, projects need to move to sharing developed assessments from the limitations of passive descriptions.
- **Developing staff.** Sure Start will provide further input into staff training and development around evaluation and performance measurement for the Sure Start programme. This will include learning about the application of the balanced scorecard and guidance may be needed on use of information sources projects hold or can easily collect. First indications are that a workshop activity should be organised on the balanced scorecard with follow up for clusters and projects.

- **Customer/user evaluation.** It is recommended that Sure Start use the balanced scorecard method in project evaluation. Projects should be introduced to the method so that they understand its application and may apply it themselves if they wish. These recommendations are seen to carry particular benefits in improving feedback.

- **Gaining qualitative information.** Case studies and quotes from individual families are valuable alongside, but not instead of, more systematic group based ways of gathering customer/user evaluation. The De Leuven scale is an important aid in measuring the interaction, responsiveness and attunement between individual adults and children. Projects and Sure Start should share experience on different ways in which feedback may be teased out to improve the level and quality of information. Methodology on tracing families and children needs to be developed.

- **Defining priorities.** Within the four broad categories (social and emotional development; improving health; ability to learn; strengthen families and communities), the Board needs to work further on where the greatest weight/emphases are to be put. Everything is clearly not of equal value! This process has started with the Board's review of key performance indicators for Sure Start as a whole. The Board is concerned not to place any unnecessary burdens of reporting on projects and recognises that different data and information may be needed from projects to that provided to date.

6.2 All steps have been tailored to an environment in which local evaluation fits within the other demands on Sure Start projects. It is recognised that time for staff and volunteers will always be limited, particularly where the same individuals are responsible for projects in more than one Sure Start area. At the same time, the Sure Start On The Ocean Board is concerned to ensure the full accountability to itself of the projects it is funding. Cluster and thematic development forms an essential, not optional, part of this accountability.

7. Key performance indicators

7.1 Agreeing key performance indicators is an essential step in Sure Start showing how successful its work is. The Board review session on 14 March gave detailed consideration to a preliminary list of key performance indicators. The following list has been assembled taking full account of those discussions:

1. Parents' knowledge of child development fostering secure attachment – measurement including being able to discuss effectively child behaviour
2. Effective development of self-help networks by local residents that support sustained achievement of core Sure Start objectives – measurement to include effective development of local leadership by local residents
3. Development of service user voice based on engagement of the family in the service(s) delivered
4. Take up of publicly available services directed at Under 4s and their families – helping to establish that services are inclusive and not stigmatising
5. Support around maternity and early years involving all members of the family – measurements drawing out family learning and families facing and overcoming the stigma around speech and language delays
6. Effective integrated co-working to address needs of Under 4s and their families – measurement to include case studies
7. Projects meeting targets set including careful and thorough diagnosis and action in relevant individual cases – measurement to include the use of case studies
8. Successful progressive mainstreaming of Sure Start work – measurement to include assessing impact in service redesign
9. Developing staff skills in changing practice and developing more integrated work – measurement to include evidence of innovative service development and delivery; measurement at 6 or 12 monthly intervals
10. Clusters developing specific indicators and successful achievement of those indicators
11. Effective participation through public events and drop-ins - measurement to include use of accessible information, attendance, contribution of events to Sure Start development and feedback from those attending

12. Ensuring balanced programme in design and achievement meeting milestones within local and national Sure Start programmes
13. Development of objective self-assessment and evaluation around performance throughout Sure Start and projects supported – measurement through assessment of project appraisal forms; measurement at 6 to 12 month intervals
14. Increasing employment rates within families with Under 4s through successful training and careers advice and advance of lifelong learning

8. Conclusions and recommendations

- 8.1 The approach set out in this paper follows that agreed by Board members at their meeting on 14 March 2002. The Board will be adopting this approach in the local evaluation of projects and Sure Start On The Ocean.
- 8.2 The Board review meeting on 14 March 2002 has given particular priority in local evaluation to:
 - Getting cluster development off the ground
 - Ensuring an active community development dimension to local evaluation
 - Exploring appropriate thematic development within local evaluation
 - Refining the key performance indicators
 - Providing training in the use of the balanced scorecard
- 8.3 This paper forms an essential part of the brief to the external evaluator to undertake her/his work.
- 8.4 The Board will take into account any relevant conclusions from the national evaluation of Sure Start being undertaken by Birkbeck College.

Hilary Barnard, HBMC
24 Leighton Grove
London NW5 2QP
0207-284-1566
hjb7@tutor.open.ac.uk

hilarybarnard@aol.com

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Appendix 1

Questions presented in consultation for Sure Start Board and projects

The following questions were addressed to both the Sure Start Board and projects in the February 2002 discussion paper:

1. What is the best way to develop information gathering and evaluation that provides an objective view of work with the different age groups of Under 4s?
2. What preparatory processes to support project evaluation would provide the most objective picture of project achievement?
3. What are the best ways for projects of sharing experience on feedback from users?
4. How do projects currently evaluate impact on local communities of their work?
5. How can local people be involved in local project evaluation?
6. What do the best examples of collaboration between projects look like? How are these experiences shared?
7. What indicators for projects will show most clearly changing work practice?
8. How detailed is the current picture of needs held by individual projects?
9. What measures of performance should each cluster have?
10. Given that different projects in the same cluster will often serve the same families, how can clusters enable greater user/customer input?
11. How can community development be given an appropriate profile within the work of the cluster?
12. Do you want to learn about the balanced scorecard? What future training/briefing on evaluation and measurement would be most helpful for project staff?
13. What periodic thematic evaluation (as described in this paper) should Sure Start undertake?
14. What qualitative indicators of performance that can be set up are most important to local evaluation of Sure Start On The Ocean?

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