

**PARTNERSHIP WORKING IN SURE START LOCAL
PROGRAMMES**

**SYNTHESIS OF EARLY FINDINGS FROM LOCAL
PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS**

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Background

This report synthesises findings from local programme evaluations addressing partnerships and partnership working in Sure Start Local Programmes. The report is based on early findings from those programmes that have started the task of evaluating the nature and effectiveness of their partnerships. Partnership working is often seen as the only way to address complex issues and Sure Start guidance emphasises the key role that partnerships have in directing and supporting the Sure Start Local Programmes' efforts to improve outcomes for children in their particular locality. It is against this backdrop that programmes are encouraged to evaluate and reflect on the structure and outputs of their partnerships, using findings to highlight areas of good practice and those areas that would benefit from improvements.

1.2 Methodology

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is actively engaged in bringing together all evaluation reports and summaries that are produced by Sure Start Local Programmes. For the purpose of this paper all reports received were examined for any evaluation outputs relating to partnerships and partnership working. This process yielded 27 pieces of research that were of sufficient relevance to be included in this report. Qualitative analysis was used to develop a thematic framework by which the report contents could be categorised.

1.3 Findings

- *Conceptualising Partnership*
In the research drawn on for this report Sure Start Local Programmes have thought about partnership in three main ways: as a conceptual process; as an operational system for management; and as an approach to practice.
- *Sure Start and Local Partnerships*
High levels of commitment by partnership members were reported, with strong beliefs that Sure Start Local Programmes had much to offer the local communities. Partnership members recognised the benefits of long-term funding, multi-agency working and the new flexibility that the Sure Start approach offers.

- *The Partnership Board*
Positive comments were made regarding the experience of board membership. Parents feel that they are listened to and some reports highlighted the new equality felt by all partners.

Efforts have been made to minimise the use of jargon in meetings and documents, to support parents in their development as board members and generally make the board process accessible to all. However this was not a feature of all reports.

In contrast to the commitment to Sure Start principles, there is much comment in the reports about poor attendance at board meetings and training functions, particularly by representatives from statutory bodies. Other members perceive this as indicative of weak commitment.

- *Partnership with Parents*
All evaluations identified the vital role that parents have in creating a successful Sure Start partnership. Many programmes create a wider sense of partnership with parents through parent forums, participation in staff selection, employment opportunities within the programme as well as inclusion in decision-making at board level. Often the process of parental engagement is referred to as a process that needs to be an ongoing focus of programmes and boards.
- *Team Working*
Many reports conclude that there are benefits to team working. It has facilitated more effective working with families, which result in better outcomes for the providers and recipients of services. The ability to respond more quickly, often facilitated by co-location, was also a positive feature reported in some evaluations. However it is noted by some that service and agency cultures and language still have the power to disrupt effective joint working.

1.4 Conclusions

Sure Start Local Programmes are inevitably at different stages in their evaluation journeys. However it should be of concern that many programmes are not engaged in evaluating the structure and effectiveness of their partnerships, especially since it is an area highlighted for priority in the local evaluation guidance. There is a need to continue to encourage and support programmes in this process, with advice, methodological support and reasoning. Effective partnerships remain a key delivery vehicle for Sure Start Local Programmes and it is necessary to reflect on how they function and what they achieve.

Most reports highlight some positive aspects of their partnerships and stakeholders' commitment to the principles of Sure Start appears undimmed. Issues around poor attendance at partnership meetings were highlighted with representatives of statutory agencies being singled out for particular attention. This may reflect the workload of those representatives along with the requirement for attendance at a wide range of different partnerships and initiatives.

Parental involvement was reported as a vital component in developing effective partnerships. The extent to which this had been achieved was variable. Parental involvement is a matter of equality and many reports highlighted the efforts to minimise jargon and make the board process accessible to all. Sustaining parental involvement is reported to be a priority by many local evaluations. Seeking ways to support parents such as the use of Parent Development Plans may be a useful mechanism to achieve this.

Partnership working at practitioner level is often reported as the strength of Sure Start Local Programmes. Co-location of workers is cited as facilitating more effective joint working. All evaluations highlighted the benefits of this aspect of the partnership model. There is still a need to focus efforts on changing organisational cultures and language to provide the best opportunities for working together to improve the quality of life of those parents and children whom Sure Start serves.

These findings are consistent with those reported in the research briefs 'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start' (Tunstall, Allnock, Meadows and McLeod, 2002) and 'Getting Sure Start Started' (Ball, 2002). Working in multi disciplinary teams is a challenging task but these early findings illustrate that it can work well and is reported as being beneficial for both practitioners and families. As in other NESS findings commitment to the ethos of partnership working remains high, as is the desire to make sure the partnership functions in an inclusive way.

2. Introduction

This synthesis report is concerned with partnerships and partnership working in Sure Start Local Programmes. It is the first in a series of synthesis reports to be produced by the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) Support team, which will aim to provide overviews of local evaluation findings on specific topics. The collation and dissemination of information relating to local evaluation is an important part of the work of NESS, and is facilitated through the NESS website (www.ness.bbk.ac.uk) and through regional workshops and networks. This report extends this work by bringing together a number of local evaluation reports from throughout the country that have focused on, or included, the examination of partnerships and partnership working.

Sure Start is an initiative that depends on close and effective working arrangements between a range of stakeholders. Sure Start guidance on the governance of Sure Start Local Programmes at a local level emphasises that a partnership approach is essential to the achievement of national targets and local objectives and milestones. Partnership is consequently a topic, which many programmes seek to include in their local evaluation strategies. This follows Sure Start Unit guidance on local evaluation, which highlights partnership as a cross-cutting theme, which should be evaluated as one of the key processes through which Sure Start is being implemented.

This has been further emphasised in research by the National Evaluation of Sure Start, which has shown that the effective working of the partnership is critical to the process of setting up and developing a Sure Start Local Programme (Tunstall et al, 2002). However, it is also widely recognised that partnership working is challenging and requires commitment both by those developing Sure Start at a strategic level and those working directly with children and families.

It is therefore important to consider in greater detail the issues being identified within local programme evaluations concerning their partnerships. This report aims to synthesise the early findings about partnership working in Sure Start Local Programmes. Several objectives are identified:

- To summarise the way in which the concept of partnership has been defined and conceptualised in Sure Start local programmes;
- To identify the methods and techniques used to evaluate partnership;
- To define common themes and issues in the findings generated by local evaluations.

The discussion of these issues should therefore provide insight not only into the ways in which partnership working is being experienced by Sure Start Local Programmes at different stages of their

development, but also develops understanding of how local evaluations are being undertaken.

The report begins by considering what partnership means in the Sure Start context and why it is important to evaluate how it is working in individual programmes. Thereafter there is an explanation of how the synthesis of these early findings was undertaken and the results of that process. Information is also provided into the methods employed by programmes to investigate this area, which it is hoped will be useful to those programmes that have yet to start evaluating their partnership. Finally, a number of useful resources for programmes intending to evaluate partnership are listed in appendix 2.

3. Why evaluate partnerships and partnership working?

Partnership and Sure Start

In considering the local evaluation of partnership, it is important to understand how partnership operates within Sure Start Local Programmes. Sure Start Unit guidance explains the significance of partnership to the development of Sure Start Local Programmes. At an early stage in this process, a partnership board is established which brings together key stakeholders, including representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies, and parents and other members of the community. It is the board's responsibility to deliver the programme according to the approved plan, to monitor its progress and achieve its targets, and to make changes to the plan as appropriate. The board should maintain an overview of the programme, keeping the main strategies under review in terms of how well they are working and resolving any policy issues. In addition to the board, Sure Start Unit guidance outlines additional forums and sub-groups, which may be established to develop different aspects of the programme and to optimise stakeholder involvement.

Partnership is also essential to the delivery of services and to the achievement of Sure Start targets and local objectives and milestones. Local programmes vary in the models they adopt to deliver services, the main difference relating to the balance between a core Sure Start team and the extent to which services are located in other agencies. This will have practical implications for the nature of partnership working in terms of the extent to which staff are based in the same building and the kind of mechanisms that exist within a local programme. The local evaluation reports agreed strongly on the importance of partnership to the overall success of the programme, and consequently the need to understand from an early stage how well this was working.

4. Methodology

At the time of writing the NESS Support team had access to some 150 evaluation reports and other documents relating to evaluation produced over the period 2001-2003. For the purposes of this report, all the reports were read in order to identify those containing some evaluation of partnership working. Twenty-seven reports with sufficient detail about partnership were identified (see Appendix 1 for a full list).

It is of course important to recognise that many other programmes may have evaluated partnership working, but their reports were not at the time of writing available to the Support team. It is also clear from reports *not* dealing with the issue of partnership that this is something many more programmes plan to evaluate in the future.

As later sections will explain in more detail, there were differences in the scope of the evaluations of partnership and in the methods used to research the issue. We would expect this given that local evaluations are designed according to the needs of Sure Start Local Programmes at particular stages of their development. Such diversity is also useful for programmes planning evaluation of this issue in that it highlights the variety of ways in which evaluation of partnership can be undertaken.

This is therefore a small sample of Sure Start Local Programmes, and care should be taken in generalising from the findings. It is not strictly representative, though the sample includes evaluations from programmes at different stages of development – of the 27 local evaluations; four came from Round 1, ten from Round 2, eleven from Round 3 and two from Round 4 – and from different regions. Evaluators based in universities and external consultants carried out the majority of the evaluations.

In addition to recording the methods used in the local evaluations and other aspects of the design of these local evaluations, the findings generated by the evaluations were analysed qualitatively. This was done by identifying common themes and issues within the reports, and organising these into categories. Sufficient consistency was found within the reports to allow comparison and so to generate some useful messages about this issue. Many of the findings from the local evaluation reports also support those described in the National Evaluation of Sure Start's reports 'Getting Sure Start Started' (Ball, 2002) and the first survey of rounds 1 and 2 'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start' (Tunstall et al., 2002).

The report respects the confidentiality of findings from local evaluations. Local evaluation of partnership is often a sensitive issue, as indeed a number of reports acknowledged. Individual programmes have not been named in relation to findings and, where illustrative examples have been provided, individual programmes should not be

identifiable. The programmes listed in Appendix 1 have given permission for the details of their evaluation reports to be included.

5. Local evaluation findings

In the evaluation reports studied it is said that partnership was usually identified early in the history of the programme as a significant topic for evaluation and there was a strong sense of 'taking stock'; the majority of the programmes seemed to have undertaken their evaluations of partnership just after the 'setting-up' phase had been completed. Partner agencies had made certain commitments, for example regarding resources, and evaluation was important to see how these commitments were being put into practice as the programme developed, and if necessary to review those arrangements.

Local programmes also saw the evaluation of partnership as important in terms of the future of Sure Start services within their local communities. Most programmes were operating in areas where a range of other 'partnership' based initiatives were currently or had been at work – examples included Single Regeneration Budget, Children's Fund, Connexions, and Health Action Zones. Evaluation of how partnership was operating in Sure Start Local Programmes was therefore seen as an important way to inform the development of local strategies for partnership working more widely. It was also felt that, despite the proliferation of partnership working arrangements in community development, there was a lack of information about effective models of working which could be transferred to Sure Start, and indeed tools for evaluating partnerships.

The findings outlined in this section are concerned with four areas of common interest across the reports studied, namely: partnership working as a concept, usually defined as the success of the partnership; the working of the partnership board; partnership with parents; and team working. As previous sections have highlighted, the priority given to these areas varied considerably between evaluations. Nevertheless, there were clearly many similarities in programmes' experiences.

(i) Successful Partnership working

Encouragingly, many of the local evaluations reported finding a high level of commitment to the principle of working in partnership and to Sure Start values. Several evaluations asked participants about their knowledge of and views of Sure Start as an initiative. Views were in general positive, and included an appreciation of the following:

- The fact that Sure Start recognised the inter-connected nature and extent of social problems;
- The existence of a long-term funding strategy;

- The encouragement given by Sure Start for the establishment of new relationships between professionals, parents and other members of the community;
- A continued focus on issues from the perspective of families;
- Flexibility in the way in which services were delivered.

When asked what would help facilitate good partnership working, interviewees, who included parents and board members from statutory and voluntary sectors, stated:

- Good communication between all members of the partnership, their organisations and the community;
- Openness and transparency;
- Receptiveness to other ideas;
- Tolerance of different perspectives;
- Knowledge of other professional roles;
- Strong management, specifically the leadership exercised by the programme manager;
- Clear objectives for the partnership board which translates into effective management of the programme;
- Wide representation on the board from the community, providers of services and statutory agencies;
- Accessibility for parents and carers to be involved in the decision making process.

These reflect much of the information contained in Sure Start Guidance to Local Programmes, which identifies certain features of successful partnerships. These are:

- Co-operation – all partners are prepared to use their knowledge and expertise to work constructively to make the partnership work rather than put up barriers; they are clear about what is and what is not negotiable and agree on the process for resolving disputes.
- Listening to others – partners respect each other's different experience and perspective and are prepared to change their own views and those of their organisations.
- Inclusiveness – no one partner dominates the membership or proceedings; there is a wide level of involvement and all, especially parents, are able to make their voices heard.
- Accessibility – the language used is appropriate (it's not overly formal, has no jargon and takes account of English as a second language); meeting venues and times are arranged so that everyone who wants to is able to participate.
- Open communication – information is widely circulated to all partners and their views are actively sought; partners make sure they share information with others on the partnership.
- Transparent processes – everyone is clear about who makes decisions and on what basis these are made.

In the same way as these features promote partnership the guidance also highlights ways in which this can be impeded. These include, for example, differing levels of experience of being involved in partnerships, scepticism on account of negative experiences of partnerships, and anxiety about professional autonomy.

There was also evidence that early difficulties in the implementation of the programme did not diminish this commitment. Interviewees spoke of 'weathering the storm' and the belief that practical and organisational factors, rather than obstruction on the part of individuals, had constituted the main barriers to effective joint working. Such problems included finding appropriate buildings, setting up IT systems, and lack of a programme manager. There was also widespread agreement that Sure Start is a long-term project that will inevitably take time to implement. Interviewees were conscious that much progress had still to be made, in improving knowledge of and accessibility to services and in ensuring that internal structures were sympathetic to Sure Start principles. In the words of one board member:

'Sure Start is working well – It's going in the right direction'

(ii) The Partnership Board

This was an important theme of the majority of evaluations, and five of the reports focused exclusively on this issue. Indeed, the decision to evaluate the partnership/ partnership working was often underpinned by a feeling that the structures and processes of the board required review. A key element of this related to concerns in the programme more generally regarding parental participation, and how parents experienced their participation in the board. The following indicates the key issues emerging:

- Many positive comments were made regarding the experience of partnership board membership. Where parental engagement is good, parents felt that they were listened to and had been able to contribute to the development of the programme in a meaningful way. One report recorded comments from staff that felt that the existence of a partnership board, which included parents, helped keep the programme focused on the needs of the local community.

'The board is quite reactive, things are getting sorted...if you feel that there is a problem you can bring it up and people are going to listen and do something so the board is working really well'
(Voluntary sector representative)

- A number of barriers were identified to parental participation in the partnership board. The most common problems concerned the use of jargon and the absence of training to enable parents to take part in such meetings. Occasionally practical barriers to participation,

such as the timing of meetings and the lack of childcare facilities were also noted.

'I can't stand people that talk in initials all the time, by the time I have worked out what it is I've lost the drift of the conversation so it was decided early on that we wouldn't use jargon that we didn't need to and I think that really helped' (Parent)

'As yet they (partnership meetings) have always been on a Tuesday which is impossible for me' (Statutory sector representative)

- Where there were a large number of partnerships within an area, it was argued that there was a lack of capacity at a strategic management level to manage the varying requirements of the different partnership arrangements. On the other hand, some evaluations concluded that there was now a high level of experience within their local areas about working in partnership, and that this pool of expertise had been helpful in the development of Sure Start programmes.
- Some evaluations discussed how the Sure Start Local Programme linked in with other partnerships and joint working initiatives. Some interesting examples were available – for example, a programme where links with Connexions had enabled joint working in relation to teenage parents and also illustrations of how programmes interface with other regeneration programmes were reported.

'The joint working with the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder is innovative and gives Sure Start a better chance of being mainstreamed' (Voluntary sector representative)

- It was evident that some of the programmes were experiencing difficulties as a result of the number of people technically listed and/or attending board meetings. For example, in three evaluations concern was expressed at the lack of attendance of senior officials from partner agencies. This was traced to the early strategies used by programmes to engage other agencies, namely by seeking to involve those at assistant director level. It was also argued that this problem could relate to the lack of clarity on the content of partnership meetings, and their failure to focus on issues that would attract the interest of managers at this level.

'I sometimes think that attendance could be a little better, but I will say that the voluntary sector and the parents are always present' (Programme manager)

- The organisational structure of how the boards and programme relate to each other can create confusion in some programmes. Examples included a lack of clarity over the respective roles of the lead and accountable bodies, which was impeding effective

decision making, while in others the number of sub-groups had resulted in a 'layering' of management which was not considered helpful.

- In six evaluations dissatisfaction was recorded with communication processes. Specific concerns included the lateness of meeting minutes, board members not always being notified of meetings and the amount of paperwork.

'They started always to be on a Monday...now I'm not getting anything I am right out of it now' (Voluntary sector representative)

(iii) Partnership with parents

This is an area in which findings are mixed. Most evaluations had correctly interviewed parents to ascertain their views. Other interviewees also made reference to how they contribute to the partnership. Common themes across the evaluations included:

- The programme's experience of involving parents was frequently linked to the process of setting up Sure Start in the community, and the extent to which early expectations were met and enthusiasm for the Sure Start programme maintained. In some programmes, these early experiences had been difficult and continued to have implications for perceptions of, and relationships within, the partnership.
- All reports recognised that parental participation was an essential element in the partnership, and even where it was felt that programmes had been successful in this dimension of their work, it was recognised that ongoing effort was needed to sustain this. Ensuring that many parents had the opportunity to be involved in order to maximise representation was an issue raised in some reports.
- Evaluations uncovered varying degrees of satisfaction in the extent to which progress had been made in enabling parents and carers to have a voice in the partnership and indeed within the programme more widely.

'The last meeting I attended and all the way through the conversation it was them, them, them. I said "Hold on, I am a parent, I am sitting as one of them take that on board as well"' (Parent)

Different perceptions were also evident regarding what constitutes good evidence of parental involvement in programmes. For some, evidence of commitment was equated with participation and the presence of parents was sufficient. For others, commitment might exist but there were also many difficulties, for example, a lack of agreement

about how involvement could be achieved. One programme identified a series of indicators that could be used to evidence involvement including, for example, parental representation at board level, local participation in the interviewing and selecting of prospective staff, chairing of interview sessions by local people, local support of early initiatives, a core group of parents who have participated in a number of ways. There were different views of how representation and involvement on the partnership board reflected or linked into other aspects of parental participation in the programme.

'It took a while (to settle into the board) but that's because it's strange to me because it was something completely different when they're all there, there are a lot of people' (Parent)

Some reports highlighted the role that partnership board training could have in supporting members to contribute effectively to the decision-making process. Board development days, and in one report a parent development plan, were cited as mechanisms that can impact on the partnership function in programmes and make an active contribution to capacity building.

(iv) Team working

A wide range of staff from a variety of backgrounds will typically be involved in the delivery of Sure Start Local Programme services. Key staff can include speech and language workers, health visitors, midwives, community development workers and early years teachers, among others. It was clear from the evaluations that there was considerable diversity in terms of contractual arrangements for the employment of staff, and the way in which a 'skill mix' operated within programmes. Overall, however, joint working at ground level was viewed as more successful than at strategic level.

'Awareness of the Sure Start ethos needs to be raised within partner organisations, i.e. beyond the management board members. The cultures of the employing organisations tend to dominate and the flexibility of Sure Start funding isn't taken advantage of' (Board member)

Key issues emerging were:

- The benefits of multi-disciplinary working were reiterated in many of the studies. Throughout the reports there was evidence of an understanding of the need to compromise, and respect for the way in which colleagues from other agencies had worked on behalf of Sure Start. Staff felt they had learnt from working with members of other disciplines. Examples were also given of the way in which the involvement of staff from different backgrounds had enabled more effective working with families, for example in terms of identifying needs that would otherwise not have been recognised. In one

report the benefits of a team approach to working was identified as the most positive aspect of work for the respondents to a staff questionnaire.

'I do enjoy meeting the other members of the team...I really do like the involvement of parents involved in this.... the real big thing is feeling so positive about many of the excellent services that have been possible' (Sure Start worker)

- Positive findings regarding working in partnership with other agencies usually featured certain key elements. These included:
 - a strong commitment to the principle of partnership working;
 - regular meetings of workers engaged in the same area of work;
 - a shared office base, though not essential, was often reported as facilitating joint working;
 - pre-existing partnership working arrangements in a wider area or age-range, and therefore familiarity with this style of working;
 - joint training and staff development.
- Consistent with research in many other areas, differences were recorded in culture and language between agencies, which had to be 'teased out' to facilitate effective joint working.
- Staff from some professional backgrounds, particularly health and social services, were sometimes reported as being more comfortable with a joint working approach than those based in education. However, this varied according to local conditions and the histories of local programmes.
- The importance of ensuring that staff from different disciplines continued to receive appropriate supervision and support within the Sure Start structure was highlighted.
- One evaluation found that line management of core staff appeared undefined, and line management workload was reported to be a matter of concern. It was reported that sometimes it was unclear how line management operated with respect to staff employed by partner agencies, for example NHS trusts.

6. Designing local evaluation of partnership

One of the tasks of the National Evaluation is to offer guidance and support to the evaluation that is currently taking place in Sure Start Local Programmes. To this end it is important that some time in this report is set aside to comment on the methods that are being employed in evaluating partnerships in the delivery and development of Sure Start services.

The complexity of partnerships and partnership working has been well documented. This makes it a challenging issue to evaluate, and some evaluators noted difficulties in finding relevant literature or evaluation tools that could be used to assess partnership working in Sure Start Local Programmes. Where other literature had been reviewed, a number of important issues were highlighted, including the broader trend towards partnership working within the UK and challenges associated with achieving representation from different groups. Consideration of other definitions of partnership also seemed helpful in distinguishing between partnership as a concept, organisational structures associated with partnership working, and partnership as an approach to practice. These three ways to think about partnership are reflected in existing literature (Thorlby & Hutchinson, 2002).

(i) Defining terms

Local evaluations of partnership working used the following three definitions to categorise the issues:

- the partnership process: meetings, decision-making, planning and consideration of the quality of the partnership;
- operational systems: arrangements for running the partnership, management, financial control, monitoring;
- inclusivity: the voice of parents and the community, consensus and equality.

Potentially, then, evaluations of partnership covered a wide range of issues from programme management and structure, to the way in which the local partnership with service providers and voluntary groups operated.

(ii) Deciding on research methods

Three models of evaluation research were identified from the local evaluation reports examined:

- Action research – in this approach research into partnership is based on a style of research that emphasises a continual interaction – often represented as a cycle or spiral – between reflection, research and action. This provides a framework for the research and also more importantly for feeding back findings into the programme. Following the evaluation, a workshop on

partnership may be held to facilitate the programme in taking forward the recommendations of the report.

- The Theories of Change model – this proposes that evaluation should be an integral part of everyday working practice. The perspectives of key stakeholders are therefore essential to understanding how well key processes such as partnership are working. Staff are questioned regularly and discuss their thoughts together.
- Realist evaluation - this emphasises the relationship between context, process and outcomes. Realistic evaluation aims to examine how well programmes work, for whom they work, why they work and in what circumstances. Within this overall framework partnership working is viewed as an important new way of working within a complex initiative such as Sure Start.

7. Partnership and the local evaluation strategy

All but one of the reports made explicit reference to how the evaluation was undertaken. It was possible to identify three clear methodological approaches that have been popular with evaluators.

Group 1

A review of partnership takes place, usually facilitated by an external consultant. This has provided the opportunity for discussion about the partnership – usually in terms of operational systems. Evaluations that fell into this category tended to be smaller and more time-limited pieces of work and only two of the sample reports could be categorised in this way.

Group 2

Evaluation of ‘the partnership’ is commissioned as a specific piece of work. Proportionately, commissioning of evaluation to external evaluators is common in relation to partnership. This may reflect the sensitive nature of partnership evaluation and the need for objective evidence to be sought around effectiveness or otherwise of a partnership. Nine of the evaluation reports studied fell into this category.

Group 3

Internal or external evaluation of the partnership is seen as an aspect of the on-going process within the programme. This was true for the majority of the reports studied, and 15 reports could be categorised in this way. Inevitably, the difficulty with this group is that partnership held varying degrees of importance within the evaluation strategy at the point when the report was written. In some evaluations, partnership was to be evaluated in-depth later in the programmes’ history and the information included represented a ‘taster’ while in others questions

about partnership had been included in interviews covering a range of issues from capacity building to accessibility for hard to reach communities.

8. Research methods

The various methods used in the local evaluations have been summarised. The methods used to investigate partnership were fairly similar across the evaluations and are detailed in Table 1. The majority used semi-structured interviews with partnership members either as the only method or in conjunction with others such as observing partnership board meetings.

Most reports indicated that there had been a good response to the evaluation, and this may reflect programmes' recognition of the significance of partnership working. The programmes that had adopted a questionnaire approach (only a small number) had, for example, obtained response rates ranging from 50 per cent to 74 per cent.

Table 1

Methods used in Sure Start local evaluations of partnership

Method	Evaluations where this was the sole method	Evaluations where this method was used in combination with others	Totals
Semi-structured individual interviews—with members of the partnership board, Sure Start staff, other stakeholders and parents	10	12	22
Documentary analysis of meeting minutes, strategy documents and other programme documentation	-	8	8
Observation of partnership board meetings and other programme activities, including team meetings and services	-	3	3
Focus groups, either specifically convened or using existing forums such as parents groups	-	8	8
Surveys of partnership representatives and in some cases programme staff	2	4	6

Little comment was made about the size of the sample in relation to the programme area population in the majority of reports using interviews or

questionnaires, which has implications for the interpretation of findings. Purposive sampling strategies, which seek out key informants with knowledge and the position to contribute to the research, were often adopted and generally reflect the foci of aspect of the evaluation. Limited time was cited frequently as a particular problem both in terms of the evaluators being able to organise interviews and the time pressure that participants were under. Evaluators did attempt to minimise these effects by:

- ‘piggy-backing’ interviews on other activities such as staff meetings;
- use of focus groups, combined with self-completion questionnaires;
- giving interviewees the option of completing interview schedules in writing;
- offering interviewees choices – for example, participation in a focus group or an individual interview.

Evaluators generally aimed to talk to a range of people with a stake in the Sure Start Local Programme, including parents, carers, Sure Start staff and managers, members of the partnership board and representatives from other agencies.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the number of evaluations and the groups who were involved. This information is, however, somewhat tentative, as the amount of detail included in reports regarding the sample was variable.

Table 2

Stakeholder groups represented in Sure Start local evaluation of partnership

Stakeholder group	Number of evaluations
Parents, carers and other members of the community	19
Sure Start staff, including the programme manager	17
Members of the partnership board – such as parents, service providers and statutory and voluntary sector managers	16
Representatives from other agencies such as front line staff or other professionals working in the locality e.g. head teachers	13

Analysis Strategies

Relatively little information was included in reports regarding methods of analysis. Six reports stated that interviews had been tape-recorded

and transcribed. Where information was included regarding methods of analysis, this appeared to have been qualitative and undertaken manually. One evaluator had used a software package for analysing qualitative data.

Ethical issues

The lack of comment in reports concerning ethical considerations is an area that needs to be addressed. The confidentiality and protection of evaluation participants is paramount and evaluators need to record how they have ensured that good practice in this area is attended to. Particularly evaluators should ensure that:

- Where external evaluators are involved, early meetings between the evaluator and prospective participants to explain the purpose and nature of the evaluation is undertaken;
- Clearly written, jargon-free information to prospective participants about the research is provided;
- Clear assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity are made;
- Where interviews are being tape-recorded, the option to have the tape switched off whenever the interviewee requests is made;
- An accessible 'question and answer' section in the report regarding methods and including information on the ethical approach that had been taken in the evaluation is provided.

Writing-up and presentation of the reports

The reports studied varied greatly in length and style of presentation. The majority included executive summaries, and some of the lengthier reports used chapter summaries. In one case these were written on coloured paper, which seemed a useful aid to readers wishing to scan the report more quickly. All contained recommendations regarding actions for programmes to consider in the light of evaluation findings. In two cases plans were outlined for team meetings or workshops where the implications of the evaluation could be discussed.

Future local evaluations

For those programmes that have not started to evaluate the effectiveness of their partnership, listed below are some ideas of how the programme could begin the evaluation process.

- Look at some of the partnership assessment tools that are available. The Health Development Agency document *Partnership Working A Consumer Guide to Resources* details a range of

toolkits that could be used. There is a link to this document in appendix 2. Although these may have been designed for use in other settings they do provide some insight into how others have thought about measuring the effectiveness of partnerships.

- Produce a map of your partnership. Start by indicating who is on the partnership board and look at the organisations that they come from. It may be useful to consider the rationale for their inclusion on the board and what they are able to bring to the partnership. By mapping in this way you will also be able to identify the links that are formed by the partnership membership to other partnerships, agencies and initiatives. This is also a very useful way of identifying any gaps in representation that you may have on your partnership.
- Partnerships need active participation if they are to work. It may be useful to conduct an attendance audit. This may identify organisations that are unable to provide a regular attendee or may indicate that venues or times may be impacting upon the ability to attend.
- Interviews remain a useful method for accessing views concerning partnerships in Sure Start Local Programmes. Many of the evaluations in this report included some form of interviewing to uncover how people felt about partnership working.
- Some programmes have used a questionnaire due to time constraints and the difficulty of getting to interview everybody. You could construct a questionnaire to look members' opinions of how effective the partnership is. Programmes could also ask members to suggest any changes that might make the partnership improve.
- Sometimes it is worthwhile looking at how the multidisciplinary team is functioning. This is another aspect of the partnership that could be evaluated. Programmes could look at the mechanism by which a range of services are offered after a first contact and how particular family's needs are being met by the different parts of the Sure Start Local Programme Team. This could be achieved either by an audit of existing data or a particular case study to be incorporated in a full evaluation report.
- Evaluators can look at the functioning of the partnership board by making use of the minutes that are produced. It is possible to report on the decision making process, the inclusivity of meetings etc by this type of document analysis.

These are just a few ideas. Please make use of your contact with the NESS Regional Support Officers for Support to Local Evaluation (see appendix 3) to explore how your programme might be able to evaluate the partnership board and partnership working.

9. Conclusions

This synthesis of available findings has demonstrated that, in line with Sure Start principles, the evaluation of partnership is an issue of ongoing concern to Sure Start Local Programmes. The evaluations vary in the scope of their investigations and in the methods used. This is encouraging in demonstrating the diversity of work that is taking place in terms of local evaluation, and the fact that local programmes are shaping their evaluations to local needs. Sure Start Local Programmes are inevitably at different stages in their evaluation journeys.

However it should be of concern that many programmes are not engaged in evaluating the structure and effectiveness of their partnerships especially since it is an area highlighted for priority in the guidance. There is a need to continue to encourage and support programmes in this process, with advice, methodological support and reasoning. Effective partnerships remain a key delivery vehicle for Sure Start Local Programmes and it is necessary to reflect on how they function and what they achieve.

The important role that parents have to play in the partnership is clear from this research and barriers to parental participation have been identified. Efforts to ensure access and equality, if not already in place, are recognised as important priorities for programmes. Parents' commitment and desire for involvement was widely reported and as such can be indications that programme governance and decision-making includes parental views.

At the service delivery level, there was endorsement of joint working and joint training arrangements. This was seen as being better for both the deliverers and recipients of services. For many this had changed the nature of their work and enhanced the quality of their working life. Organisational cultures were still cited as being barriers to more effective team working.

It was also clear from the reports studied that Sure Start Local Programmes recognised the importance of evaluation as a tool in the development of their work. Partnership was acknowledged to be a key element of this, and an understanding of how well this was working from an early stage was viewed as necessary if changes to practice were to be made. These evaluations were also valuable in highlighting the many positive areas of practice and the strong commitment to partnership working that clearly existed in the majority of programmes. It was clear that involvement of parents was an on going process.

This report is based upon a relatively small number of evaluations and as such cannot be seen as a definitive exposition of how partnerships are working in Sure Start Local Programmes. However, it is

encouraging to see that partnerships are coming together to maximise the opportunity that Sure Start funding has provided and genuinely seek improvements in the quality of life for families and children. NESS looks forward to adding to these findings so that a more representative and robust appraisal of partnership working can be provided, forming a basis with which assumptions about outputs and outcomes can be more reliably made.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Sure Start Local Programme local evaluation reports

Round	Programme name	Report title	Report authors	Date of publication
1	Sure Start North Canning Town	Sure Start North Canning Town Evaluation 2001-2001	Cordis Bright Consulting Ltd	July 2002
1	Sure Start South Greenwich	Building Firm Foundations: The evaluation of the first phase of Sure Start South Greenwich	Bitel, M., Kaufmann, J., Thurlow, J., Bowen, G. and Yigletu, B., Partners in Evaluation	June 2002
1	Blackpool, Sure Start Mereside and Clifton	Sure Start Clifton: Evaluation Report Summary	Smith, C., Whitely, H., Whittaker, K. (University of Central Lancashire) and Williams, T. (Community Capacity Consultant)	May 2002
1	Wealdon, Sure Start Hailsham East	'Trailblazing' Hailsham East Sure Start 1999-2002	Luckock, B. and Briant, J., University of Sussex	June 2002
2	Portsmouth, Sure Start Somerstown	Inter-Agency Working Within the Sure Start Somerstown Initiative	Hayden, C. and Goodship, J., Social Services Research and Information Unit, University of Portsmouth	2002
2	Leicester, Sure Start St Matthews	Sure Start St Matthews Partnership: Evaluation Report 1	Cordis Bright Consulting	November 2002
2	Birmingham, Sure Start Ladywood	Ladywood Sure Start Evaluation Interim Report Autumn 2002-Spring 2003	Mould, C., Alchemy Training Ltd	No date
2	South Tyneside, Sure Start All-Saints	Local Evaluation Report 1	McKenna, L., Biott, C., Cook, M. and Marples, G., University of Northumbria	December 2001
2	Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sure Start Newcastle East	Interim Report 2: Analysis of Stakeholder Views	Parks, J. and Cunningham, R., University of Northumbria	April 2002
2	Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sure Start Newcastle West Gate and East	Interim Report 1: Results from the Review of Research and Literature Relevant to Sure Start	Parks, J. and Cunningham, R., University of Northumbria	October 2001
2	Boston, Sure Start Boston	Evaluation Report: How the Partnership is Working and Developing	Toyne, J., University of Lincoln	April 2002
2	Walsall, Sure Start Blakenall	Blakenall Sure Start – Evaluation Report April 2001-March 2002	Piggott-Smith, E.	May 2002
2	Sunderland, Sure Start North Washington	North Washington Sure Start Local Evaluation Report No.1	Swain, J., Cook, T., Walker, L., Walker, C., Hughes, C., University of Northumberland	December 2001

2	Wear Valley, Sure Start Wear Valley	Sure Start Wear Valley: Evaluation Report: Year 2	Centre for Applied Social and Community Studies, University of Durham	April 2003
3	Chester-le-Street, Sure Start Chester-le-Street	Evaluation Feedback Report: The Setting Up Phase	Potter, C., Lee, S., Schneider, J., Carpenter, J. and Williams, B.	January 2003
3	East Staffordshire Inner Burton	Team Working Approach	Dunmore N	July 2003
3	Waveney, Sure Start North Lowestoft	Sure Start North Lowestoft Annual Report Year 1	Maitland, L.	January 2003
3	Southend-on Sea, Sure Start Milton	Sure Start Milton Annual Evaluation Report 2003-2003	Hegarty, J.	April 2003
3	Tower Hamlets, Sure Start Teviot and Crisp Street	Annual Evaluation Report 2002	[Partnership element undertaken by external consultants]	2003
3	Middlesborough, Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm	Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm Evaluation Report: Establishing Sure Start: Key Issues, Processes and Challenges	Peter Jackson, School of Social Sciences and Law, University of Teeside	June 2002
3	Knowsley, Sure Start Northwood	Northwood Sure Start Evaluation Year 1: Evaluation of Processes and Mechanisms in Place to Support Delivery	Ruth Melville, Centre for the Study of the Child, the Family and the Law, University of Liverpool	2002
3	Herefordshire, Sure Start Kington and Leominster	Sure Start Leominster and Kington, Evaluation Report	Daniels, P., Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Sure Start Leominster and Kington	January 2003
3	Havering, Sure Start Hilldene and Gooshays	Partnership Working: rewards, Obstacles and Challenges in Sure Start Harold Hill	Houston, A., Evaluation Officer, Sure Start Hilldene and Gooshays	July 2003
3	Newham, Sure Start Little Ilford	Sure Start Little Ilford Local Evaluation 2001-March 2002	Cordis Bright Consulting Ltd	July 2002
3	Bromley, Sure Start Penge	Sure Start Penge Strengthening Partnership Working	SMP Community Participation Training and Consultancy	December 2002
4	Tamworth, Sure Start Tamworth	Partnership Working	Dunmore N.	August 2003
4	Waltham Forest, Sure Start North Leyton Triangle	Cementing the Partnership: An Evaluation of Sure Start North Leyton Triangle's Management and Partnership Working.	Ahenkora, S. and Ahenkora, K.	November 2002
NA	NA	Working in Partnership: The development of good governance	Barry Hope and Christine Morrison (Commissioned by the Regional Sure Start Unit, Government Office North East)	No date

Appendix 2

Partnership: useful references

Audit Commission (2002) *Developing Productive Partnerships: A Bulletin*. London: Audit Commission.

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Thorlby, T. and Hutchinson, J. (2002) *Working in Partnership: a Sourcebook*. London: New Opportunities Fund. www.nof.org.uk

Tunstall, J., Allnock, D., Meadows, P., McCleod, A. and the NESS Research Team (2002) *Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start*. London: The Sure Start Unit.

Appendix 3

Support for Local Evaluation Contact List

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