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Towards understanding Sure Start local programmes: Summary of findings from the national evaluation

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Towards understanding Sure Start local programmes: Summary of findings from the national evaluation

Abstract

Sure Start is the Government's programme to support children, families and communities through the integration of early education, childcare, health and family support. Sure Start local programmes are one element of this, based in areas of disadvantage, whose aim is to improve the health and well being of young children under 4 and their families, so that children have a greater opportunity to flourish when they start school. The National Evaluation of Sure Start local programmes has now been in place for 3 years, during which a large amount of information has been collected and reported. This summary draws together some of main published findings from the different strands of the evaluation and in particular highlights some of the newly published findings. These are only a very small selection of findings, intended to provide a flavour and whet the appetite to find out more. At this stage, findings from different parts of the evaluation are reported separately although these will be drawn together more substantially later in the year to assess the overall effect Sure Start local programmes have had on children, parents, families and communities and whether variations in implementation, local community context and costs can explain any differences in effects.

Keywords

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Towards understanding Sure Start local programmes

Summary of findings from the national evaluation

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The National Evaluation of Sure Start local programmes has now been in place for 3 years, during which a large amount of information has been collected and reported. This summary draws together some of main published findings from the different strands of the evaluation and in particular highlights some of the newly published findings.

These are only a very small selection of findings, intended to provide a flavour and whet the appetite to find out more. At this stage, findings from different parts of the evaluation are reported separately although these will be drawn together more substantially later in the year to assess the overall effect Sure Start local programmes have had on children, parents, families and communities and whether variations in implementation, local community context and costs can explain any differences in effects.

The characteristics of Sure Start local programme communities

Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) are expected to have an impact on the community as a whole as well as at the individual level, in terms of improving the health and well-being of children and families. In addition, the characteristics of SSLP areas are likely to influence the effectiveness of Sure Start local programmes in improving the health and well being of young children and families. The community context module of the

evaluation therefore collects a wide range of socio-economic data to describe SSLP areas and document any changes in these communities over six time points between 2000/1 and 2006/7. Two rounds of data collection have been completed¹, enabling some early examination of change between 2000/1 and 2001/2. However, it must be borne in mind that change over one year is a relatively short time period and also most programmes had only been operating for a short period of time at this stage. Therefore, it is difficult to attribute changes to one reason or particular intervention.

¹ See Barnes et al (2003), Characteristics of Sure Start local programme areas: Round 1-4, and Barnes et al (2004), Characteristics of Sure Start local programmes areas – 2001/2.

Key findings

- ▶ Many SSLP areas suffer from some of the worst deprivation in England. Unemployment, worklessness and low income were all more than double the national average in both 2000/1 and 2001/2.
- ▶ Just under half of all young children in SSLP areas lived in households where no one was working, again almost double the national average (43% compared to 22%), although there has been a significant reduction in this in the past year, down from 45% to 43% which is slightly greater than the national average.
- ▶ One third of SSLPs have an ethnic minority population of 20% or more. Residents from the Indian sub-continent are the majority ethnic groups in 22% of programme areas. Black residents form the majority of the ethnic minority community in 15% of programmes areas.
- ▶ The average birth rate in 2001/2 in SSLPs was 16 per 1,000 population compared to 12 per 1,000 for England. For SSLPs this was a slight rise from 2000/1 while the figure for England remained unchanged. The percentage of births to lone mothers in 2001/2 was 25% and to teenage mothers 4%.
- ▶ There is a slight suggestion that some of the changes observed between 2000/1 and 2001/2 may be due to Sure Start uncovering hitherto unmet needs. For example, children attending special schools and those with identified Special Educational Needs (SEN) increased in SSLP areas, whilst those for England declined slightly. Similarly, the level of social services activity related to child protection increased substantially in SSLP areas.

Implementing Sure Start local programmes

The evaluation has studied the implementation of the Round 1 and 2 SSLPs in considerable detail from their setting up in 2000/1 through to their more established state in 2003/4. This part of the study is now reaching its mid point and has already reported some important findings² of which the following are just a selection. A fuller mid-term integrated report on the implementation of SSLPs will be published in Autumn 2004.

Getting started

- ▶ There is widespread support for the philosophy of Sure Start, especially the opportunities to work in multi-agency teams, and across professional boundaries, to focus on prevention and early intervention, to involve families and communities and to enhance existing services.
- ▶ The challenges of working in a Sure Start way, and having to work from a low base of existing services and appropriate staff, meant that programmes took longer than anticipated to become fully established, on average taking programmes between 24 and 36 months to be offering their full range of services, have capital developments in place and be spending at their peak level.
- ▶ The strength of relationships on the SSLP partnership, particularly with statutory and voluntary agencies and between professionals and practitioners and parents, appeared to be a key factor in how quickly programmes were set up.
- ▶ Building or refurbishing premises took longer than anticipated and finding sufficient space for staff to deliver services from, was an issue in the early stages.

Parental involvement

- ▶ The level of parental involvement in SSLPs is generally high, although this inevitably varies across programmes, with parents, primarily mothers but also fathers and grandparents, being involved in a wide range of tasks, including planning, management, service delivery and evaluation.

Leadership

- ▶ The task of managing a SSLP is multi-faceted and challenging and programme managers require a broad range of skills – especially managerial, planning and development skills. They also need to be flexible, supportive, approachable and motivated.

Working in partnership

- ▶ SSLPs have made some good progress in working in partnership at both strategic and operational levels. However, joint working is challenging and time consuming and there is still some way to go.
- ▶ Key factors of 'successful partnership' working seem to be early clarification of purpose, strong levels of commitment, ownership and trust amongst partners and clear administrative processes to support partnership development. Areas with strong histories of collaborative working seem to have made greatest progress in working in partnership.
- ▶ There is widespread enthusiasm from front-line staff and managers for working in multi-disciplinary teams. Positive aspects of multi-disciplinary working have been identified as greater flexibility, opportunities to work beyond rigid professional boundaries, sharing good practice and being better able to inform parents about the range of support available to them.

- ▶ However, there are still some important hurdles to cross to achieve effective joint working at the operational level, including managing teams with professionals and non-professionals and managing staff from different professional backgrounds.
- ▶ Some programmes are addressing these through joint training and frequent and inclusive staff meetings, though the increased time commitment this involves can be an issue, especially for part-time staff.

Reaching children and families

- ▶ Sure Start local programmes are making a diverse and sustained effort to reach their target communities and are optimistic about reaching the whole community, although in general are not doing so yet.
- ▶ Home visiting and outreach are the most important means for reaching as many potential Sure Start families as possible. Midwives and health visitors are particularly important in facilitating initial access to Sure Start services.
- ▶ Specific, wide ranging and innovative efforts are being made to reach potentially vulnerable groups, with this seeming to be working better where there are designated workers who specialise in making contact with such groups, for example fathers workers, key workers for specific minority ethnic groups. Targeted outreach is an especially important strategy for making initial access with these families.
- ▶ Sure Start is perceived as being predominantly for non-employed parents and mothers, largely because of the 'office hours' that services are available. It is more difficult to engage with employed parents and fathers.
- ▶ There is generally a high level of confidence and trust in Sure Start from parents and this is encouraging parents to use services and spread the word to friends and neighbours.

Staffing

- ▶ Staffing SSLPs is a complex task with staff needing to be drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds. As well as the ability to use their professional skills, staff in a multi-disciplinary environment need to have a range of other skills, particularly a high level of personal skills, the ability to work with and empathise with parents and to develop new approaches to service delivery.
- ▶ Secondment is an important way of filling posts in SSLPs, and when it works well it is beneficial to both the programme and the seconding agency. However, there are often many practical difficulties to work through and many programmes are struggling with the challenges of dual lines of accountability and conflicting loyalties.
- ▶ A challenge for staff in SSLPs is the professional/non-professional interface, particularly how best to work alongside one another in a way that deploys professional input appropriately, but also embraces the very real skills support staff have in working with the local community and gaining the trust of parents.
- ▶ Training is one of the key ways to draw staff from different backgrounds together to work in a complementary and multi-disciplinary way. Programmes that took a systematic and pro-active approach to training appeared to be more successful at ensuring staff had the appropriate skills than those who took a more ad-hoc approach.

The impact of Sure Start local programmes on child development and family functioning

The National Evaluation of Sure Start is studying 15,000 9 and 36 month old children in 150 SSLP communities and a further 3,000 in 50 comparison, 'Sure Start to be' communities, to assess the early impact of SSLPs on child and family functioning. The 9 month olds in SSLP areas will be followed up at age 36 months, 60 months and beyond, to assess the longer term impact of SSLPs. In 2003, data has been collected through home visits, on 8,000 children in the first 75 SSLP communities, and on 3,000 children in the comparison communities, with the data in the remaining SSLP areas to be collected during 2004.

Preliminary analysis³ of this partial dataset at this early stage in the operation of SSLPs, suggests a positive, limited effect of SSLPs (after discounting a multiplicity of factors that might otherwise make children and families different from one another, such as parent education, family income, and child gender). Consideration of a wide range of child, parenting and family measures, found one modest, but significant difference suggestive of a Sure Start effect – specifically that mothers in SSLP areas were more likely to treat their child in a warmer and more accepting manner than in comparison areas. This finding is consistent with the overarching principle of Sure Start, that it is first necessary to influence parenting and family behaviour which will in turn 'flow through' to affect child development.

In addition to exploring average differences between the children and families in SSLPs and comparison areas to detect Sure Start effects on each individual child, parent and family outcome, the analysis also explored whether some individual SSLP communities, after taking into account a wide range of family and background characteristics, produced better than expected results when 20 different measures of child behaviour and parenting were combined into a single grand outcome.

Interestingly, individual community level SSLP areas were more than twice as likely as comparison (Sure Start-to-be) communities to show evidence of better than expected child/family functioning.

Although very preliminary, and thus needing to be interpreted cautiously, these results show some promising signs of effectiveness, particularly given the very early point in the SSLP at which the data have been collected. At this stage, programmes were only just becoming established so the children in the study will only potentially have received a small level of input from the Sure Start programme. Moreover, a large proportion of the children were aged just 9 months so will have received considerably less. These findings are not inconsistent with other studies of early years intervention programmes which show that positive effects tend to emerge after longer durations of receiving the intervention and later in life.

Further analysis of this dataset is continuing, in particular to see if programmes with particular characteristics are having any differential effects. Efforts are also underway to explore in more detail the features of the seemingly most effective programmes. And of course, these preliminary results may change significantly once the analysis is based on the complete dataset.

Improving the employability of parents

This study⁴ undertaken in 2003/4 looked at what was happening to improve the employability of parents in 25 Sure Start local programmes. Key findings include:

- ▶ SSLPs provide a wide range of support to help parents obtain employment – from confidence building courses through to specific training, sign posting to other services, help with finding childcare and advice and support in finding suitable employment locally.
- ▶ However, the overall proportion of parents taking part in employment and training activities, even in the most active and encouraging programmes, is low. Those who do take part are almost all mothers.

- ▶ The local programmes act mainly as a bridge for parents into the education, training and employment provision services of other organisations which specialise in such services. Collaboration between Jobcentre Plus and SSLPs is one of the main ways of improving the employability of parents in Sure Start local programme areas.
- ▶ It is the quality of this collaboration with other agencies which determines the success of SSLPs in tackling issues of employability. However, this varies as some agencies do not see working with the SSLP as a priority.
- ▶ Most of the SSLPs who take either an 'active' or 'lifelong learning' approach to promoting employability, employ training or employment co-ordinators. Employment co-ordinators offer advice and support to parents who are looking for work and help them tackle any barriers they face. They also develop and maintain relationships with other organisations. Training co-ordinators have responsibility for developing all kinds of training for parents.
- ▶ Confidence building is an important early step towards employability and all programmes offer a range of approaches to building confidence in parents.
- ▶ The provision of childcare for training courses is an important contribution that SSLPs are able to make to improving parents' employment prospects in the longer term. However, only a minority of the programmes were providing childcare for working parents. This was largely because the demand for childcare was very low, due to reluctance to use formal childcare and the high costs.
- ▶ By emphasising confidence building and raising aspirations SSLPs can reconcile what is sometimes perceived to be a conflict between promoting good parenting and promoting employability.

⁴ Meadows, P., Garbers, C. (2004) 'Improving the Employability of Parents in Sure Start local programmes'.

Towards understanding Sure Start local programmes

Summary of findings from the national evaluation

Involving fathers

This study⁵, undertaken in 2002, investigated how much men were involved in SSLPs, how they were being encouraged to take part, what they were being offered and what they thought about it. The study took place in 25 case study programmes which had been operating for approximately one year. Key findings include:

- ▶ There was a relatively low level of father involvement in programme activities, and where fathers did participate it was more likely to be in fun type activities.
- ▶ Fathers were more inclined to attend activities designed especially for them. Involvement in these types of activities were often a stepping stone into a wider range of SS activities.
- ▶ Fathers were more involved in programmes where there was a member of staff dedicated to involving them.
- ▶ Where programmes had higher levels of father involvement they had decided very early on that fathers would be central to their work, and there was a joined up approach across the programme to involving fathers.

Further information

This summary is based on findings reported by the National Evaluation of Sure Start team at the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck College, University of London. Further information about National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) can be found at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk

Further copies of this summary and all the other summaries and reports referred to in this summary are available from:

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Further information about Sure Start local programmes can be found at www.surestart.gov.uk