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Centre for Public Health Research

**Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres
An evaluation of a new programme**

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Executive summary

Introduction

Sure Start is a government initiative introduced in April 1999 with the aim of meeting the needs of families with children aged 0 to 5 years who are living in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. Sure Start Children's Centres were formerly run through local programmes in only the most disadvantaged wards in the United Kingdom, but since 2006 local authorities have overseen a move to a mainstream national service following evidence that service delivery at local programmes was inconsistent. The Government aim to expand provision to provide a Children's Centre in every community by 2010.

The Children's Centres in Widnes have been providing a collaborative programme of events for parents across the whole of Widnes since September 2006. In line with the change to one programme of joint activities in Widnes, new publicity materials have been developed to communicate programme details to parents. Staff at the Widnes Children's Centres perceive that the new programme has attracted new parents to activities, increasing the overall attendance at some activities. It was therefore timely to explore more closely the response of staff and parents to the changes in the service provision and, in particular, the response to the promotional materials for the programme.

Study design and methods

This was a small scale study designed to explore the experience of Children Centre Staff; partners; and parents and carers of the new joint programme of activities. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore the range of responses to the new programme. The study utilised semi-structured staff and partner interviews and structured parent interviews.

The staff and partner interview data were combined and the transcripts subjected to thematic analysis. Interviews with parents were analysed using a mixture of thematic analysis and descriptive statistics as appropriate. These findings were used to draw conclusions about the new programme and publicity materials.

Findings and conclusion

Transition to the new programme has been relatively smooth; partnership working between the centres and with partners is improved, easing many of the pressures on the service. Parents are benefiting from a more standardised, co-ordinated service in Widnes and the publicity materials have helped to create a better understanding of the programme amongst professionals and parents which has improved parent access to activities. However, effective communication within the team, with partners and with parents needs to be maintained while the changes are embedded within the Children's Centres. Consideration also needs to be given to the timing of activities in relation to outside family commitments that pose a barrier to service engagement and new methods need to be continually sought to target those parents who are hard to reach.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Sure Start is a government initiative introduced in April 1999 with the aim of meeting the needs of families with children aged 0 to 5 years living in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. For seven years, services were delivered through local programmes, run independently by Sure Start staff in close collaboration with other statutory and voluntary organisations. Following evaluation of the local programmes, the approach to delivering Sure Start services was overhauled and since 2006, responsibility for Sure Start programmes has been reassigned to Local Authorities. Prior to 2006 only the most deprived areas received funding for local programmes, but the services have now been extended to other areas with a view to expanding provision to every community in the United Kingdom (UK) by 2010 (Sure Start, undated a).

The move from local programmes to a mainstream national service arose following evidence that the 'principles of Sure Start were not being consistently applied' across the country (Sure Start, 2006, p.3). Research also found 'significant variability' in the extent to which local programmes were able to reach all families with young children in their area; particularly groups commonly excluded from mainstream services (Sure Start, 2006, p.3). The policy of restricted access to Sure Start services was heavily criticised by practitioners and parents because it prevented many parents in need of support from accessing services. While services are now open to every parent, there remains an expectation that services respond to the needs of parents with particular difficulties. Sure Start principles state their dedication to provide:

*Services for everyone, but not the same service for everyone.
Families have distinctly different needs, both between different families, in different locations and across time in the same family.
Services should recognise and respond to these varying needs
(Sure Start, undated b).*

While many of the principles of Sure Start work remain unchanged, services have had to adapt to an expanded remit encompassing a wider geographical area.

Services are now delivered through Children's Centres. The Sure Start Children's Centres are at the heart of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2005). The aims of this are for all children to:

-
- be healthy;
 - stay safe;
 - enjoy and achieve;
 - make a positive contribution;
 - achieve economic well-being.

In order to assist families in achieving these aims, centres are required to facilitate delivery of: free early years provision; information and access to childcare; parenting information; antenatal and post-natal services; employment and training information for parents; and information for parents at transitional points for their children. In addition, suitable provision should be made to support families at increased risk of poor outcomes, for example, families in workless households. Government guidance communicates an expectation for greater research-based practice within Children's Centres (Sure Start, 2006). Centres will be expected to utilise local data and collate their own data to track service users to inform development of activity programmes.

1.2 Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres

Sure Start New Steps local programme and Sure Start Widnes Trailblazer local programme are now designated Sure Start Kingsway Children's Centre and Sure Start Ditton Children's Centre respectively, for the purposes of this study they will be referred to as Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres (SSWCC). The Children's Centres in Widnes have been providing a collaborative programme of events for parents across the whole of Widnes since September 2006. Staff in the Widnes Children's Centres perceive that the new programme has attracted new parents to activities, increasing the overall attendance at some activities (personal communication 20/02/07).

In line with the change to a single programme of joint activities in Widnes, new publicity materials have been developed to communicate programme details to parents. The new publicity constitutes a move away from a range of posters and leaflets advertising individual activities and groups, to a single brochure describing all SSWCC services and an accompanying timetable for each quarter.

1.3 Reaching hard to reach groups

While there has been much praise for Sure Start work done with parents, the Government remains critical of the inability of some programmes to reach the most excluded groups who 'by their nature are not going to come to places like Sure Start'

(Gould, 2006). Research into reaching “hard to reach” groups has shown that reasons for non-take up of services are complex and varied.

Identification of hard to reach groups poses a number of difficulties. Agreement between service providers’ and target populations’ perception of need for services poses an initial difficulty. Acknowledgement of differences over conceptions of need in some instances between families and support workers, challenges the assumption that hard to reach groups need formal support (Broadhurst, 2003). Further, there is little consensus regarding the role and impact of informal social networks amongst hard to reach groups (Broadhurst, 2003).

With these caveats in mind, family support practitioners do agree however, that certain groups have been traditionally difficult to engage with formal services. A Home Office report on delivering services to hard to reach families produced three broad definitions of hard to reach groups to assist service providers in reaching target groups. The report identifies distinctions between: minority groups; those who ‘slip through the net’; and the service resistant (Doherty, Stott & Kinder, 2004). The first group comprises people traditionally marginalised in society due to population characteristics, such as minority ethnic groups, travellers or asylum seekers. The second group comprises those with needs not always immediately apparent to practitioners, such as carers or those with mental health problems. The final group is characterised by hostility to formal services either due to over-targeting, or disaffection possibly linked to substance abuse or involvement in criminal behaviour (Doherty, Stott & Kinder, 2004). These categories highlight the range of issues blocking access to services and the range of responses required to combat them.

There is consensus that common reasons for non-take up of services exist. Barriers to engagement include practical obstacles such as the cost of activities or transport to services. Lack of childcare for siblings who do not meet the age requirements of a service also prevents many parents with more than one child from accessing activities (Ahenkora & Ahenkora, 2003). Given the range of initiatives undertaken by Sure Start to combat these practical barriers, some Sure Start staff perceive that these issues are used by some parents to screen more significant psychological barriers to access (Mexborough Sure Start, 2004, p. 8).

A number of psychological barriers to accessing services have been identified. Some parents may avoid formal services for fear of being watched by authorities (Mexborough Sure Start, 2004). Mistrust of formal services was also acknowledged

as a barrier to accessing much needed support in a study of a home visiting service (Barnes, 2006). The Mexborough research also identified fear of stigma and fear of the unknown as further psychological barriers to accessing services (Mexborough Sure Start, 2004). Engaging parents in a one-off event offers an opportunity for programmes to challenge these fears amongst parents (Garbers, 2006).

Lack of information can constitute a significant barrier to accessing family support services for many parents (Mexborough Sure Start, 2004). Non-users in particular, have been found to have a general idea about what Sure Start is, but 'very few [know] what specific activities [are] happening and at what time on a regular basis' (Ahenkora & Ahenkora, 2003, p. 21). Parents interviewed for Sure Start research in Blakenhall appealed for a 'parent pack which explains what each activity does and who it is aimed at' (Ferron-Smith, 2004). To reach all target groups, services must also ensure that the information they are providing is accessible: literacy issues and cultural differences within the community can create barriers to communication with parents (Partners in Evaluation, 2004). Communication of services, and of the help available within the service to overcome practical barriers to engagement, therefore comprises a significant aspect of Sure Start work.

Children's Centres in Widnes employ a number of methods to communicate with the local community. A strong emphasis has always been placed on reaching parents via antenatal support so that parents are encouraged, by a healthcare professional, to register with a local Sure Start programme during pregnancy. Healthcare professionals often deliver the registration pack to new parents. Referrals are also made to Sure Start via other professionals who work closely with Sure Start, for example Connexions workers and Social Services staff. Prior to the development of the new publicity materials, leaflets advertising specific events or activities were posted to all registered parents, displayed in local places, and delivered door-to-door. Significant emphasis is therefore placed on the publicity materials produced by Sure Start.

Research in Widnes by Perry and Samuels (2006) found that parents were often overwhelmed by the amount of information received during pregnancy. Although non-service users often had sufficient information about Sure Start, there was evidence to suggest that this group had issues with the content and delivery of the Sure Start programme (Perry & Samuels, 2006). These issues included a perceived lack of activities for small babies, doubts over the benefits of involvement and problems with

the timing of activities in relation to other commitments (Perry & Samuels, 2006). The new SSWCC joint programme of activities has attempted to address some of the former gaps and duplication in Widnes Sure Start service provision.

1.4 Aims of the study

SSWCC commissioned the Centre for Public Health Research (CPHR), University of Chester, to explore the response of staff and parents to the changes in the delivery of Sure Start provision and, in particular, the response to promotional materials for the programme.

The objectives of the study were to:

- explore staff and parent/carer¹ experiences of the programme of joint activities across Widnes;
- explore the ways in which the publicity material is used by staff and parents.

1.5 Structure of the report

This report is organised into a number of chapters. Chapter 2 describes the study design and research methods utilised. In Chapter 3 the findings from qualitative interviews with Sure Start staff and partners (professionals) are presented and in Chapter 4 are the findings from parent interviews. Finally, in Chapter 5 the findings are discussed in the light of the aims and objectives of this study and the literature reviewed.

¹ Throughout this report 'parents' will be used to signify 'parents and carers'.

Chapter 2

Study design and methodology

2.1 Introduction

This was a small scale study designed to explore experiences of the new joint programme of activities provided by SSWCC and the corresponding publicity materials. Views were sought from staff within each of the Widnes Children's Centres (staff); professionals working in partnership with Widnes Children's Centres (partners); parents using Sure Start services in Widnes; and parents registered at a Widnes Children's Centre but not using a service.

2.2 Data collection methods

The study used semi-structured interviews with staff and partners. Semi-structured interviews have a 'loose' structure consisting of open-ended questions that define the area to be explored, but allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to follow up particular areas in more detail (Britten, 1995). Thus, although the interview topics and questions that lead into exploring these areas may have been defined initially, the semi-structured format allows interviewees to express ideas that are important to them, and answers can be clarified and complex issues probed (Bowling, 2002). As the aim of the research was to capture responses to changes in service delivery, it was expected that open-ended questions would allow staff and partners to highlight areas of success or to raise issues of concern. The flexibility afforded by using semi-structured interviews enabled staff to describe their experience of change in greater detail.

Interviews were also conducted with parents, but were more structured to enable the researcher to explore a range of issues in a relatively short space of time. Nevertheless, parents were encouraged to expand upon any issues that they wished to in order to grasp what was important to them.

All of the interviews were conducted during March and April 2007. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face at Children's Centre venues. Two staff interviews and interviews with parents not attending Sure Start services took place over the telephone.

2.2.1 Staff and partner interviews

Initially, a purposive sampling strategy was used: a deliberately non-random approach to participant selection (Bowling, 2002). This strategy selects individuals because they are 'key informants', that is, they are in the best possible position to comment on the topic of interest to the research because they have direct experience of it. In order to ensure that all aspects of the work of SSWCC were explored, the sampling strategy was designed to include a range of roles within the Sure Start staff and a range of professionals referring or contributing to the service. Variation was also sought in terms of level of staff involvement in the development of the new programme in order to achieve a broad view of staff experiences. Interviews with senior staff responsible for the joint programme of activities were conducted first, to ensure the researcher was well briefed on the aims and objectives of the new programme before approaching other staff for interview.

Following discussion with senior staff at the Children's Centres, a list of potential staff participants was developed. A participant information sheet was e-mailed to these staff, inviting them to take part in an interview. A copy of the participant information sheet can be found in Appendix 1. Staff were then telephoned to ascertain if they were willing to take part and interviews were arranged at a suitable Children's Centre venue. As the interviews progressed, some interviewees suggested others whom they considered would be useful informants for the study, and so these individuals were also approached: thus an element of snowballing (Bowling, 2002) was introduced to the sampling strategy.

Interviews with staff lasted between 20 minutes to an hour. Interviews with Sure Start partners lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. Staff were asked to sign a consent form after being given the opportunity to ask questions. With the permission of each interviewee, interviews were audiotaped and the audiotapes transcribed verbatim. If it was not possible to audiotape an interview or the interviewee was not agreeable to this, notes were taken during the interview process and were written up as soon as possible after the interview had been completed. As the partner interviews were more informal, verbal consent to participation was obtained. The interview schedules used in the evaluation can be found in Appendices 2 and 3. Areas covered during both the staff and partner interviews included how the programme had been developed, how the programme was running (with particular reference to partnership work across the Children's Centres) and response to the publicity.

2.2.2 Parent interviews

Parents were approached while attending a Sure Start activity. By approaching parents at Children's Centre venues, the researcher could be certain that parents had some experience of the service. Agreement was reached with activity facilitators to approach parents. Parents were given a brief explanation of the purpose of the research and their involvement. They were then offered a research information sheet, which can be seen in Appendix 4. Verbal consent was obtained for the interviews.

As parents were approached during an activity in an ad hoc fashion the interviews were more structured than those with staff. This enabled the researcher to cover a range of issues in a short space of time. The interview schedule for parent interviews can be found in Appendix 5. Areas covered during the interview included parents' use and experience of the service, their perception of the impact of the new programme and their use and opinion of the publicity. Parents did not always have time to answer all questions, so questions were selected by the researcher according to issues arising in the first stages of the interview. Interviews lasted between 2 and 10 minutes depending on the nature of the activity parents were involved in and their willingness to engage with the interviewer. Brief notes were taken during the interview, which were written up as soon as possible after leaving the activity.

2.2.3 Interviews with parents not using Sure Start services

Contact information for parents registered with a Sure Start Widnes Children's Centre, but not having used services for the last 11 months was obtained in order to conduct telephone interviews. This ensured that the sample of parents also included eligible parents who chose not to access Sure Start services. Interviews sought to ascertain why the services were not used, and whether parents knew about the new programme of activities. These interviews lasted between 2 and 5 minutes, following the same approach to content as the face-to-face parent interviews.

2.3 Data analysis

The staff and partner interview data were combined and the transcripts subjected to thematic analysis. Interviews with parents were analysed using a mixture of thematic analysis and descriptive statistics as appropriate. Transcripts were numbered to maintain the anonymity of the data. Quotations from the transcripts have been used in the findings to illustrate points made. These findings were used to draw conclusions about the new programme and publicity materials in relation to their objectives.

2.4 Ethics

An application for ethical approval to carry out this study was made to South Cheshire Local Research Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was gained in December 2003. Subsequently, an amendment to the protocol, concerning the personnel involved in the research, was approved in February 2007.

Chapter 3

Findings from professionals

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the responses from interviews with Sure Start staff and partners. Interviews were conducted with 14 members of staff; six staff members were based at Ditton Children's Centre and eight were based at Kingsway Children's Centre. The staff interviewed represented a range of roles: managerial, administration, family support worker and play/activity development. Length of service with Sure Start ranged from two to seven years, although not all staff provided this information.

Eight Sure Start partners were interviewed, representing a range of organisations. Interviews took place with a community nursery nurse, two midwives, a maternity support worker, two health visitors, a Connexions worker and a co-ordinator at The Kings Cross Project. The number of partners interviewed was evenly split between the two Children's Centres, although a number of them worked at sessions co-ordinated by both centres. Six of the partners interviewed were involved with Sure Start groups run at Widnes Children's Centres; the two remaining partners had no direct involvement with the running of any Sure Start groups. All of the partners were involved in publicising Sure Start to parents and referring individuals to services.

The findings will be presented under the following themes identified from the interviews: the purpose of the new programme; difficulties in setting up the new programme; consultation and communication; partnership working; benefits and difficulties with the new programme; and responses to the brochure and timetable.

3.2 Purpose of the new programme

Interviewees were asked to explain what they understood were the main objectives of setting up the new programme and whether or not they perceived that these objectives had been achieved.

3.2.1 Standardisation

Staff perceived that the main objective of the new programme was to deliver a standardised service to all parents in Widnes. Equal access to the same services for parents in every area of Widnes was considered important following the removal of

Sure Start boundaries. It was perceived that having one standard programme for Widnes made things simpler for parents. One staff member said:

‘Some groups [had] to change their name because it was similar to a group that someone else was running so it was like, “well, let’s make them the same group, give them the same name, so that the families know what they’re coming to.”’ (S3).

The standardised service was also perceived as helpful to professionals, when providing information to parents.

3.2.2 Harmonisation of services

Staff also identified ‘harmonisation’ of services at the two centres (S3) as a major aim of the new programme. The ‘mapping exercise,’ (S1) undertaken to review the spread of services in terms of geography, timing and target population, was praised by staff as it ensured best use of staff time and expertise, making the service more accessible to parents. Most professionals considered that a ‘joined-up’ service (S7) had been achieved with the new programme. One staff member observed that the joint programme allowed staff to ‘take the good points of each programme and melt them together.’ (S2).

3.3 Difficulties in setting up the programme

A number of staff referred to difficulties that had occurred in the initial stages of planning for the new programme. Staff identified a number of reasons for this.

3.3.1 Resistance

Staff considered that resistance from some staff to make changes to their own group or activity had made the process of creating a new programme more difficult and time consuming. Staff reported that there had been some initial reluctance to share work, which had caused problems meeting timetable deadlines. This had brought complaints from parents. One member of staff said:

‘I think some of the staff...were very protective of the services and they didn’t want to sort of share, and we had endless discussions just about...basic things like changing the names of certain groups.’ (S1).

Most staff did perceive however, that these problems had been overcome relatively quickly and that most staff attitudes to the changes were positive.

3.3.2 Logistical difficulties

A number of interviewees referred to logistical difficulties posed by the production of the timetable, these included the different working practices of the two centres, the

difference in work speed between the two teams and the high number of part time staff on the team. Restrictions imposed by the timetable on making last minute alterations to the programme were also identified as problematic. One staff member perceived that team discussions were often held too late, which led to inaccuracies in the final timetable. Another issue raised was the lack of co-ordination between the two centres with regard to posting out the timetables which was reported as a cause of confusion amongst parents.

3.3.3 Uncertainties over funding/staffing

Several staff considered that planning was inhibited by funding restrictions and uncertainty over staffing. One staff member said:

'I think there are things in the pipeline at the moment but funding is restricting us. We're a little bit stuck at the moment as to which way we're definitely going to go and what we're definitely going to provide and until that's there.. [and the Operations Manger is appointed]... we're just in a bit of a limbo...' (S5).

It was perceived that overall staff morale was affected by these uncertainties and had impacted on the amount of staff training undertaken. It was also observed that staffing issues impacted on waiting list times and that little more could be done to target hard to reach groups of people until staffing levels allowed them to offer one-to-one support to facilitate attendance at activities.

3.4 Consultation and communication

Most professionals interviewed had played a substantial role in the development of the new programme and were happy with their level of involvement. Where professionals had not had much involvement, they perceived that their involvement had been sufficient and appropriate to their position. Professionals praised several elements of the consultation process including effective utilisation of staff expertise within the team, the development of a formal communication structure for the project via the project group, rigorous use of session evaluation, and consultation with parents via the parents' forum. It was perceived that the positive attitude achieved towards the programme was due to inclusion of the whole team, at both centres, in the consultation process.

However, some members of staff reported that they were not always as well informed about changes as they should have been; this was attributed by one staff member to her part-time status. Another member of staff reported that changes had been made to her group without consultation although a compromise was eventually reached

over the disputed changes, which had satisfied the member of staff. In one instance, poor communication within the team was deemed to have hindered communication with an external partner.

All staff had been involved in some degree of consultation regarding the appearance of the new publicity materials. Staff had been asked to comment on the size, colour and format of the materials. Staff were not always happy with the consultation results however; one member of staff considered that the information that she had provided for the brochure had been edited to omit important information about her group.

A number of partners perceived that communication between the two Children's Centres was good. One partner commented:

'The teams are meeting up regularly and they are talking to each other. Staff are going to each other's sessions and sharing ideas. The two [deputy] programme managers are meeting a lot, the partnership is working well.' (P4).

Communication between partners and the Children Centre staff was also praised. Conflicting responsibilities sometimes impacted on the ability of partners to attend all meetings however.

3.5 Partnership working

Initial difficulties working cross-centre during the programme planning stages were acknowledged and it was observed that improved communication between the centres was needed to prevent further conflict. Different staffing structures at the two centres and management vacancies at Kingsway Children's Centre were also perceived as barriers to effective cross-centre working.

Staff did report an improvement in the partnership work across the two Children's Centres however. Several staff commented that, while partnership working had always been encouraged, the new joint programme had brought this to fruition. One member of staff said:

'At first it was a bit like...it's 'them' and 'us' and because we've built more of a relationship up ... that barrier and that mindset is breaking down now, so it's like, there is a more of a 'Team Widnes' kind of thing!' (S3).

Several staff mentioned working cross-centre on a daily basis. Successful joint projects were highlighted, which had utilised staff expertise to deliver a more

comprehensive service to parents. One member of staff perceived that this visible partnership working facilitated parent access to other centres, she said:

'Parents see that we're all working together and they're not so worried about which group they're going to then.' (S2).

A number of staff mentioned improved partnership work with their counterpart at the other centre; this enabled staff to provide cover for one another's sessions. One staff member said:

'The ability to interchange and step in and out of each others groups has made a big difference.' (S8).

Improved partnership working had enabled staff to make better informed and more frequent referrals to their partner centre. One member of staff commented that partnership working had expanded the level of support for staff and the opportunity to share ideas. Another member of staff perceived that the new programme and timetable had helped to improve partnership working with external partners. She said:

'I think the service level agreement staff probably feel more included... for instance, our Healthy Eating Worker probably sent out a mail shot every month about what she had coming up, but now...she does it termly, and I'm sure in the long run it helps her planning that she knows a term ahead of time what she's doing.' (S2).

3.6 Benefits of the new programme

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the new programme and mentioned a number of benefits for staff and parents.

3.6.1 Planning and evaluation

Staff perceived that improved planning ensured that the programme was better suited to the community's needs. One staff member said:

'There's no overlapping, we can see where the gaps are and plug them.' (S9).

Staff commented that the new timetable forced them to plan their work further in advance. Although staff acknowledged that planning is now a more time consuming task, most were happy with the structure that the timetable deadlines imposed on their work. One staff member said:

'It makes it easier to plan because if people want new things in, there has to be a good reason to put them in, because for us, this booklet covers most things.' (S2).

Staff were generally happy with the structured evaluation of sessions that fed into their planning. One staff member said:

'Because we are open up to...a lot more people, it's just so that it's easier to monitor because...we all know what everyone else is doing now, and we're just working together.' (S3).

3.6.2 Financial benefits

Several staff referred to the greater financial viability of using the new publicity materials. There was relief that the time-consuming task of frequent large mail shots had been made easier, particularly in light of the increase in registered parents. One staff member said:

'Now we've got over a thousand families registered. Well, two years ago we probably had 400 families, so now we have to make sure that we're not just doing a mail shot just because there's a new course... so financially I would imagine that we're saving a lot of money.' (S2).

3.6.3 Benefits for parents

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the new programme and identified a number of benefits for parents. The programme was perceived to meet local needs in terms of the range and quality of activities on offer, and the hard work of the staff. One partner said:

'The programme is great, parents learn about their children [from it].' (P2).

The 'Cook and Taste' and 'Baby Massage' sessions received particular praise from partners.

Professionals perceived that the new programme was enabling Sure Start to reach a wider range of parents and many articulated the view that the sessions had become a lot busier. Respondents also observed that changes in the social mix at groups had occurred and perceived that this had been handled well by staff to ensure that groups did not become "cliquey". One partner said:

'It's not cliquey because staff facilitate attendance at activities. Staff are very welcoming and make people feel better. It's a nice environment.' (P2).

Other benefits identified were access to an increased number of venues and the ability to access venues with friends from other areas (a benefit assisted by the removal of postcode restrictions on access). One staff member said:

'It took time for parents to get used to [the removal of postcode boundaries] but now it's like, "Well okay, that one's full; is there any places on that one?" It's like, "Yeah, yeah, go along to that one.'

And it's like, "Oh great... oh, hang on a minute, can I bring my cousin, can she come with her little 'un?" "Yep, bring your cousin!" (S3).

There was some disagreement amongst staff as to the take up of new venues by parents but most staff perceived that parents felt more comfortable accessing a different venue. One member of staff observed that parents often became attached to staff and she perceived that the new programme encouraged parents to rely on the service rather than personal contacts. Other staff found it helpful to be able to refer parents to another centre rather than put them on a waiting list. One staff member said:

'I've had a lot of Ditton mums at my groups [within Kingsway] because the timing of the Ditton group didn't suit them.' (S9).

Staff also believed that access to an increased number of venues enabled them to deliver a more reliable service. One staff member observed that Sure Start has:

'got a wider scope of venues now so it's much easier for them to have that kind of firm commitment to run a course for that length of time, whereas before, there'd be sort of clashes.' (S4).

Another member of staff considered that the joint programme enabled staff to monitor who was accessing services and ensure that parents did not access the same group at two different venues and so open up spaces for new parents.

3.7 Problems with the new programme for parents

Most staff observed that sessions had become busier since the launch of the new programme. While staff recognised this as positive feedback on the programme, the increased attendance had disgruntled a number of users of the service, particularly long-term users, for several reasons: shortage of crèche places; restrictions to the number of weeks at a group; and reduced session times were all identified as problematic. Some advantages to these changes were observed by staff however, such as the opportunity to encourage parents to use the services as a stepping stone to mainstream services and the ability to provide shorter, more focussed play sessions. Most staff believed that parents had accepted the changes; one member of staff praised the way that changes had been communicated to parents through parent meetings, but recognised that this approach did not reach all parents.

One member of staff reported that, when it was not possible to satisfy demand for places at a group, Kingsway staff would accommodate Kingsway parents first. While senior staff reported that this was not the policy in SSWCC, this comment might

suggest that the perception of two distinct services persists amongst staff, disadvantaging some parents.

Respondents had received feedback from some parents that not all of the venues were accessible because of their geographical location; it was perceived however, that adequate provision was made by Sure Start to address this issue.

Staff identified the discontinuation of the mail shots as a barrier to reaching hard to reach groups. It was perceived that parents who chose not to attend timetabled groups, would miss out on information about one-off activities, which is not included in the timetable or brochure.

3.8 Perceptions of the brochure

One member of staff perceived that the Children's Centres were better understood by the local community than the former Sure Start local programmes, largely as a result of the new publicity, and that this had directly contributed to the increase in registrations. Professionals generally approved of the appearance of the brochure. Several respondents commented that the size was useful, one member of staff said:

'Something like this [booklet] can just be put in your handbag and be pulled out whenever you need it...I mean, I've always got a couple of booklets in my bag, always!' (S2).

Others said that the brochure was 'colourful and eye catching' (S11) and 'professional' (S8), with a stronger corporate image than the old publicity materials. A number of staff said that using pictures of local children in the brochure pleased parents. The font choice was also praised as a suitable choice for parents with literacy difficulties.

Having one compact booklet was deemed to reduce the likelihood of publicity being discarded by parents. Praise was also given to the organisation of the brochure; the description of each activity; and the level of detail in the brochure. One staff member commented:

'I think parents...feel more comfortable about turning up to a new session, because they know what to expect...a very brief description is in the booklet of each activity...' (S2).

A number of other advantages of the brochure were identified by staff. These included that it was easy to refer parents to the brochure; it saved time on home

visits; and prevented parents from having to remember a lot of information. A member of staff involved in home visits said:

'The summary of each group is good. Previously parents had to remember a lot of information given verbally at the first visit. Staff can respond more quickly to enquiries [now].' (S9).

Professionals generally thought that the inclusion of useful numbers in the brochure was a good idea, although several respondents suggested that it might be overlooked by parents and so might be better placed at the front of the brochure. The 'Guide to Activities' was also deemed helpful. One member of staff thought that gridlines might help parents to use the guide more effectively as she perceived that parents were still confusing the 'book' and 'drop-in' information.

Some suggestions for improvements to the brochure were put forward. These included that more information about the range of support available to families from the local midwifery team would be of benefit to parents. Administration staff observed that it would be helpful to have the name of the activity facilitator in the publicity so that they could better direct enquiries. They also sometimes found it difficult to keep up to date with venue changes, particularly for the Cook and Taste sessions.

3.9 Perceptions of the timetable

Respondents were very positive about the timetable, praise was given particularly to its size and the 'book/drop in' information, and the timetable was deemed by most staff to be straight forward to use. However, one member of staff perceived that the timetable was quite busy looking and one partner reported that some parents were overwhelmed by information on the timetable.

Staff making home visits perceived that the timetable gave the programme a better structure and provided a useful discussion tool with parents. There were mixed views about the reliability of information in the timetable. Some respondents perceived that the 'sell-by date' (S2) printed on the timetable ensured that staff, partners and parents were all using up-to-date information. One respondent said:

'Just because it's in the booklet doesn't mean it's on, and that's why we did the timetable as a separate thing, so that that could be constantly updated and...if there was a mistake or there was a group that we couldn't run or we'd left off, it wouldn't be a major length of time before we could get it in again.' (S2).

Others observed however, that last minute changes could not always be included in the timetable, which was sometimes misleading. It was perceived that a lack of detail on the timetable was also problematic, one member of staff said:

'It's not flexible, some things don't start until a few weeks after the timetable comes out and the timetable doesn't show that.' (S10).

Responses about the map were also mixed. Some professionals found it helpful as it gave parents a rough idea of the area in which venues were situated. One member of staff said:

'It's very helpful, even though you can't see street names you can guide by areas and you know roughly where it is.' (S7).

Another member of staff reported that she added details to the map, relevant for individual families, and so found the limited detail helpful. Others perceived that more detail was needed on the map, for example road names and landmarks; one member of staff said:

'Without knowing the area the map isn't helpful. It needs street names, and postcodes for the venues.' (S13).

Staff who had been more involved with the production of the map voiced frustrations that more detail could not be put on the map that was currently used.

A number of respondents perceived that the brochure and timetable needed to be combined in one booklet as it was irritating to have to refer to both. Another suggestion was to make clearer, on the front of the publicity, that the two items needed to be used together.

3.10 Conclusion

Despite some initial difficulties in its development, professionals recognised a number of benefits of the new programme. Staff perceived that a standardised service had been achieved and that partnership working across the two centres was improving working practices and hence parent experience. Staff generally favoured the new publicity materials over the old. Staff said that the new material was 'far superior' (S7) and '100 times better' (S4), and perceived that it had facilitated better understanding of the Children's Centres within the community.

Chapter 4

Findings from parents

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with parents. Information is given about the activities visited by the researcher and the parents' initial contact with Sure Start. Parent experiences of the new programme are then presented, the findings from service users and non-users are presented separately. Finally, the views on the brochure and timetable of all parent participants are presented.

4.2 Participant details - service users

Ninety seven parents were interviewed at 20 different activity sessions. Activity sessions for a range of ages with a range of aims and formats were attended. A total of 18 different timetabled sessions were attended and two 'one-off' 'Easter Parade' activity afternoons, one organised by Ditton Children's Centre and one by Kingsway Children's Centre. Interviews were conducted at 8 different venues; 10 of the sessions were led by Ditton Children's Centre and 12 of the sessions were led by Kingsway Children's Centre.

Table 4.2.1 illustrates when parents interviewed first began using Sure Start services. Only 89 of the 97 respondents answered this question.

Table 4.2.1 Parents' first contact with Sure Start

First used service	No. of parents interviewed
Within the last 6 months	27
Within the last 12 months	16
Within the last 2 years	14
More than 2 years ago	32

There was a good range of parents who had been attending for some time and those who had started using services recently. Of the 43 parents who began using Sure Start within the last 12 months, only 4 had taken up services following the removal of geographical restrictions to Sure Start. However, a further 11 parents mentioned that although they were not formerly living in a Sure Start area, they had been able to access services following special concessions from staff. These parents were much happier that they were now fully entitled to be using Sure Start.

4.3 Motivation for attendance

The majority of parents had first heard about Sure Start from either their health visitor or midwife (43, 54%), or from friends/family (22, 28%) (only 80 parents answered this question). Where parents had first heard about services from the health visitor or midwife, five mentioned that this was during the first visit from the healthcare professional. A number of parents (6) had taken up services after coming across an activity by chance and two parents had first heard about Sure Start from a local advert. Other parents had been referred to the services by another agency: a counsellor (1), a women's refuge (1) and Connexions (3). All 3 parents who had been referred by Connexions were attending the Young Parents Group, for parents under 19 years.

The most common motivation for attending a Sure Start activity was the perceived benefit for children; parents were pleased with the opportunity Sure Start presented for children to socialise and a number of parents referred to Sure Start as being 'a treat' for their children. Of the 87 parents who responded to this question, 18 (21%) cited boredom as their motivation for attending a Sure Start activity and all but one parent in this group referred to 'getting out of the house' as motivation for attending. A similarly large number (19, 22%) cited the opportunity to meet new people and several parents within this group referred to sharing their experiences with people in a similar situation. A small number of mothers reported attending activities to deal with postnatal depression. For example, one woman stated:

'I went 'to feel like I was normal when suffering with postnatal depression.' (16).

Recommendation from a friend or family member had motivated 11 parents to attend, while a similar number had attended because of the anticipated benefit of a specific activity or group. One mother commented:

'He won't eat fruit and veg', so I attended cook and taste.' (7).

One parent said that she found it difficult to motivate herself to attend sessions without personal contact from Sure Start staff.

4.4 Experience of the programme

The majority of parents stated that the programme of activities met their needs and they expressed this in a number of ways. The free cost of services was praised and a number of parents were extremely grateful for the support that the service provided them. One mother said:

'It makes you feel there's something out there you can do, you're not on your own, you can share things.' (9).

Another woman perceived that a particular strength of the service was that it responded to people's needs. Several parents also commented on the high standard of the crèche provision. One parent reported:

'I'm very happy with the crèche. The staff are helpful and accessible. They went out of their way to get extra books for me.' (54).

Parents were pleased with the choice of activities on offer, a number of parents commented that there was increased choice since the development of the new programme. Several parents were pleased that the geographical restrictions on access to Sure Start had been lifted as this enabled them to attend activities with friends. The rise in age limit had enabled one woman to start bringing her eldest child to activities.

A large number of parents had accessed new venues following the introduction of the joint programme. One mother said:

'I couldn't attend at Ditton before because I wasn't in the area. I went to Kingsway but Ditton is more convenient.' (82).

Parents in the West Bank area were particularly pleased to have activities close at hand in Transporter Bridge House.

4.4.1 Barriers to engagement

Where parents perceived that the programme did not meet their needs, this was predominantly because of other commitments related to work, nursery or school. Other barriers to engagement with the programme included perception of cliques, frequent cancellation of sessions or errors in the timetable, and the inability of some groups to accommodate mixed age ranges. For one of the carers interviewed, the frequent changes to the care routines of her children meant she was unable to commit to a group.

Difficulties with the timing of activities arose for parents with work commitments or commitments for their children in nursery or play group. One mother reported:

'I won't be able to come when I go back to work. The Saturday stuff is Dad's only.' (93).

One parent was frustrated that the same activities are often repeated on different days but at the same time. As her children attended nursery in the morning, she was

unable to take them to Funky Monkeys or Messy Play, which are only offered during the morning session.

It was perceived that there were not many activities for small babies and one parent commented that she was restricted to attending 'coffee morning' style sessions. Another parent considered that there were not enough activities for children over three years old, particularly in the mornings. Two parents requested a stage two jewellery making course to follow the success they had achieved with the level one course.

A large number of parents perceived that sessions had become busier since the inception of the new programme. Several parents were displeased that their use of a group had been limited. One mother explained:

'Now there are limited places, our time has been limited to 10 weeks [at this group]. We've been coming for 14 months; my daughter will be devastated when it ends.' (81).

Another parent considered that the shorter length of courses meant that friendships were less likely to develop amongst the parents. Another recognised impact of increased attendance was the limitation imposed on crèche availability. One parent perceived that staff had been unhelpful when a group was full, but the majority of parents who had experienced a waiting list considered that the waiting time had been acceptable. Several parents were displeased that session times had been reduced in order to run a second group to meet demand. One parent said:

'Funky Monkeys has been shortened to an hour. It's not worth the walk now.' (78).

Although staff reported that venue choice for activities had been planned to ensure that activities were 'within pram pushing distance' for parents (S1), a number of parents perceived that many of the venues were inaccessible without a car. Several parents requested more activities at Transporter Bridge House and there was a specific request for a Breastfeeding Group at Kingsway Learning Centre. For some parents, access to other venues was restricted by a commitment to collecting older children from school.

4.5 Participant information - non users

Contact details were obtained for parents who had not accessed a SSWCC service within the past 11 months. A total of 35 telephone interviews were conducted with these parents, the number roughly split between parents registered at Ditton

Children's Centre and those registered at Kingsway. The table below shows the overall response rate.

Table 4.5.1 Telephone interviews - parent response

Response	Total	%
No reply	165	57
Anonymous call bar	5	2
Contact	35	12
Dead line	63	22
Wrong number	19	7
Grand Total	287	100

The majority of parents found out about Sure Start from either their Health Visitor (11, 32%) or midwife (13, 37%). Two parents had found out about services through a friend or family member, the remaining parents did not answer this question. A large number of parents reported receiving information regularly; several parents reported that this was monthly. A number of parents reported that they had not received any information for some time.

4.5.1 Perception of services - non users

Common reasons for discontinuing use of the service were that parents had returned to work or full time study and were no longer able to attend; their child or children were attending nursery or pre-school; or that their child/children were out of the Sure Start target age range. One parent said that the lack of crèche facilities for some activities had deterred her from attending while another parent said that the sessions were not her type of thing, she said:

'I don't use the services; I am not into stuff like that as it tends to be women sitting around having a gas and the children doing what they want.' (K10).

One parent said that she found it difficult to get out without a car and that accessing certain venues with her double pushchair was a problem. Another parent said that she might consider attending activities during the evenings, when she was not at work.

However, parents were overwhelmingly positive about Sure Start services. Parents were keen to report that they had been happy with the service when they had been able to use it. A number of parents commented on the approachability of staff,

several parents felt that there was a good range of activities on offer and that they would consider using the services in the future. One parent said:

'When we used it was great and if I had another child I would use it again as it was very helpful.' (D3).

4.6 Perceptions of the brochure

Sixty five of the 97 service-users interviewed had seen or used the SSWCC Activities and Services brochure, 12 parents stated that they had not seen/used the brochure and 20 gave no answer. A total of 10 parents explicitly stated that they had seen but not used the brochure. Some of these parents preferred to get information by word of mouth.

Just less than half of non-users interviewed had seen the brochure and the timetable, although not all parents answered this question. Four parents reported having never seen the brochure or timetable, although two of these parents had recently moved without updating their address with Sure Start. There were two instances where parents had seen the timetable but not the brochure and some parents reported that they did not bother to look at the information as they felt that the services were no longer relevant to them.

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the brochure; the colourfulness and size of the brochure were mentioned specifically. One of the parents was particularly pleased that a photograph of her child had been used in the brochure. A number of parents stated that they had kept the brochure for reference. A large number of parents stated that they found the description of each activity helpful and several parents said that it had helped them to determine which activities to attend. One mother commented:

'I like the run down of information for each session, you know if it's suitable. It used to be pot luck.' (52).

However, one parent considered that the description of each activity was insufficient, she stated:

'There isn't enough information for each session to make a decision about whether to attend. When I've turned up it's not been what I expected.' (81).

Several parents commented that it was helpful to have all of the activity information together in one place, and a few parents considered that it would be even more helpful to have the timetable and brochure combined. One woman said:

'It's a pain to refer to both books; perhaps the timetable could be in the back of the brochure.' (33).

Problems with, and suggestions for improvements to, the brochure identified by some parents included that:

- it was not clear that the brochure and the timetable needed to be used together;
- the brochure would be easier to read if it was organised solely by age suitability and that it would be helpful to have an upper-age limit with each activity description;
- an index of activities would be useful;
- the Sure Start logo on the front cover needed to be bigger.

Several parents had noticed mistakes in the brochure: one parent was annoyed that she had dropped-in to the 'Family Swim' session, after checking the booking information in the brochure, and found that she had needed to book a place. Another parent had noticed that details for the 'Aqua Babes' session was missing from the brochure.

Some parents had overlooked the 'Guide to Activities' table and the 'Useful Numbers' section at the back of the brochure. One woman suggested that they would be more useful at the front of the brochure. Several parents had used both of these sections however (one woman kept the 'Useful Numbers' section pinned up at home), and a large number of parents perceived that they were a useful inclusion in the brochure. One parent said:

'I use (the 'Guide') for quick reference to see if [activities] are suitable.' (70).

A few parents commented that the age categories in the 'Guide' should be more specific.

4.7 Perceptions of the timetable

In total, 68 (94%) of service users had seen or used the timetable; only four said that they had not. There was no response to this question from 25 respondents. Three parents explicitly said that they had seen but not used the timetable. The majority of parents were positive about the timetable, comments included that:

- the timetable looked professional;
- it was straightforward to use;

-
- the large font and coloured paper made it easier to read for parents with dyslexia;
 - the timetable could be easily kept for reference in a nappy bag or on the wall at home;
 - the 'day by day' view was helpful to planning for parents.

Parents made a number of suggestions to improve the timetable, these included:

- the inclusion of crèche information;
- reference to age suitability;
- the inclusion of a very brief description of each activity;
- clearer venue information, for example for 'Cook and Taste' sessions;
- putting grid lines on the timetable to make the information clearer.

Feedback on the map within the timetable was mixed; 42 service users said that the map was helpful, 28 said that it was not and 27 gave no answer. Only 10 parents in all said that they had used the map. Several parents said that they could not read a map well, and a number of parents commented that they did not need the map. One woman reported that she was unable to attend a particular session because she was unable to find the venue from the map. Two parents had encountered difficulties finding Transporter Bridge House and a further two parents reported difficulty finding the West Bank area in general; one woman commented:

'It's awful; I couldn't find Transporter Bridge House after driving round and round.' (32).

Other parents had successfully found new venues from the map, one woman said:

'I'm not from Widnes so it's essential. I found the new venues based on it. It has just enough information.' (52).

One parent suggested that the 'Riverside' area of Widnes was more commonly known to parents by its former name, West Bank. Parents made several suggestions to improve the map including adding: road names or landmarks; full addresses for each venue; and including the map reference number for each venue next to the activities listed in the timetable.

4.8 Comparisons between the old and new publicity materials

Given the high proportion of new service users, not all parents were able to compare the old and new publicity. Most parents who had used the old publicity materials

preferred the new materials. Parents particularly liked the fact the new publicity brings all of the information together in two documents; a number of parents reported throwing out the old publicity material as it comprised too many separate, loose pieces of paper. Parents also thought that the size, professional image and organisation of the new publicity were improved.

Some parents preferred the old publicity materials primarily because they perceived that more frequent mail shots kept them more up to date with Sure Start activities in their area. One woman said:

'The old publicity was a reminder of what's on. I kept the leaflets for the ones I was interested in.' (5).

Parents were particularly concerned that some of the information they received was out of date and that information regarding one-off events or activities was sometimes received too late or not at all. One parent commented that an old timetable was displayed in her Doctor's surgery in Millbrow. One woman found the old publicity more straight forward as it only pertained to one venue. Another parent was also concerned that the information in the brochure and timetable does not always match.

A number of general comments were made about programme publicity. Several parents said that they obtained information about activities from Sure Start Staff, and that they preferred to access information by word of mouth. Two parents said that they would like to receive more information when they go back to work and contact with staff decreases. One grandparent suggested that more could be done to target grandparents with the publicity.

4.9 Conclusion

Parents were very pleased with the new programme of activities, particularly the choice of activities and the quality of the service. Barriers to engagement with the service included working hours and nursery or pre-school commitments; these other commitments restricted the time and venue that parents could attend. The lifting of geographical restrictions was generally welcomed but some parents had commented on the impact that had on their service use.

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the new publicity materials. Parents tended to use the timetable more frequently but the description of each activity in the brochure was welcomed by parents and helped them to make decisions about what

to attend. Parents wanted more information on the timetable and there were suggestions that the brochure and timetable could be combined. While the new publicity materials were generally preferred, parents did miss receiving fliers in the post.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Overall, the participants in this study were overwhelmingly positive about the new programme delivered by SSWCC and the publicity materials that had been developed to inform parents and professionals about the services. This chapter draws upon results from interviews with Sure Start staff; partners; and parents (service users and non-users) to consider how these groups have responded to the new programme and publicity materials, and highlight issues to inform future developments. Reference is also made to the literature reviewed where appropriate.

5.2 Working practices

The consultation process that was undertaken during the development of the new programme was praised by a number of professional participants and it is likely that this process, and the sense of 'ownership' of the new programme that it may have engendered in those involved, will have contributed to the positive perceptions of the programme that were expressed. Communication had continued to improve since the inception of the programme and the partnership working between the Children's Centres which developed was perceived to have improved many aspects of service provision: resources were better used to run more sessions; it allowed staff to cover one another's sessions and so provide a more reliable service; and it encouraged greater understanding of the wider service to better advise parents. However, staff perceived that there was still some way to go to fully co-ordinate working practices. For example, there had been some problems over the planning of the timetable for each term: this caused some tensions between staff and confusion amongst parents due to the lack of co-ordination in timetable distribution. This highlights the need to keep consultation and communication at the forefront of working practices in order to provide a unified service.

5.3 Benefits of the new programme for parents

There was a consensus amongst participants that having one standard SSWCC programme covering the whole of Widnes made the service easier for parents and professionals to understand. This in itself is likely to encourage participation. There was, in addition, the perception that having a standard programme addressed some of the well documented barriers to engagement with services in a number of ways.

That parents were able to access services at any of the SSWCC venues across Widnes meant that for some, the practical barrier of transport had been ameliorated as they could go to wherever was most convenient. However, other parents articulated the view that some venues would always be inaccessible to them as they lacked their own means of transport. Some psychological barriers may also have been lessened as it was commented upon that a number of parents were becoming comfortable with accessing services at different venues and working with a variety of staff. This suggests that parents were able to build up trusting relationships with a number of different professionals. In addition, it was perceived by professional respondents that the higher turn over of parents at groups and the shorter length of sessions that had occurred because of the greater number of parents entitled to access them had prevented the development of 'cliques' in some groups. This may have encouraged more new parents to participate, as may the fact that due to the removal of geographical barriers parents could attend any sessions with friends or relatives who lived in different areas of Widnes. As reaching hard to reach groups is part of the remit of the Sure Start Children's Centre agenda, monitoring the likely impact of changes in service delivery on access by such groups is important.

5.4 Difficulties arising from the new programme

There was a unanimous perception that the changes in service delivery, particularly the lifting of geographical restrictions, had led to an increase in demand for services. For some long-term service users, this was seen as problematic because it led to a situation where their place in a group may be time limited or individual sessions had been shortened in order to create space for more parents. Thus the importance of communicating with this group of parents and actively seeking to keep them engaged with the service is underlined.

Linked to this is the issue of crèche facilities. For many parents the existence of crèche facilities was essential in enabling them to participate in services, and the increased demand being put on these facilities was making participation difficult for some. Maintaining adequate level of crèche services may be one challenge for Widnes Children's Centres.

5.5 Barriers to engagement with Sure Start services

It was clear from the interviews with non-service users in particular, but also from comments made by those using SSWCC, that one of the biggest barriers to engagement with services was competing commitments on parents' time. Working

hours, commitment to a nursery place, or collection of older children from school were the most common responsibilities mentioned in this context. These barriers to engagement were not specifically related to the new SSWCC programme, but as the programme develops further it may wish to take cognisance of them.

A number of parents highlighted the lack of evening and weekend sessions available for working parents. An extension of the Saturday club to include a session for mothers was suggested as this would allow those returning to work at the end of maternity leave to maintain engagement with services. Similarly, the suggestion was made that week night activities for parents would be welcomed. Parents with a child attending nursery indicated that services available only in the morning or only in the afternoon could prevent their engagement. A review of the 'age map' of services may help to resolve some of these issues. Finally, having to collect older children from school was articulated as a barrier to engagement with some services, particularly for parents who did not have their own transport and so had to walk or rely on public transport. It is perhaps difficult to see how problems such as these can be ameliorated, although reviewing the timing of activities may help.

5.6 Response to the new publicity materials

Parents interviewed were familiar with the new publicity materials and reported that they were well used. The materials were deemed to be professional and more user-friendly than the old publicity material as it was more compact. It was perceived that the professional appearance and consistent style of the new materials had helped to establish a corporate identity for the Children's Centres that better communicated their role within the local community and consequently improved engagement. The high standard of all publicity materials therefore needs to be maintained to ensure that a consistent message is communicated to the community.

5.6.1 Perceptions of the brochure

Parents found the brochure's appearance appealing, and on the whole were very satisfied with the description of each activity which had facilitated understanding and hence engagement with activities. The content and organisation of the information within the brochure was also praised suggesting that parents could generally find required information independently. When referring between the two booklets, it may be helpful however, to have an index of each activity by name in the brochure to ensure that the timetable headings are clearly shown to correspond to the information in the brochure. The 'Useful Numbers' section and the 'Guide to

Activities' were deemed useful but were often overlooked; these sections might be better positioned before the blank notes pages within the brochure or at the front of the brochure.

5.6.2 Perceptions of the timetable

The timetable was deemed to be straight forward to use, and parents appreciated the overview of activities that it provided, as it helped them to see at a glance where the activities fitted in with other commitments. The provision of this planning tool for parents helps to overcome the barrier presented by busy family schedules.

The map was useful for some parents but had proved insufficient for others, posing further problems to access. There was demand for a more detailed map, specifically road names and venue addresses which would allow parents to find new venues independently. The place names used within the timetable were not always consistent with those used on the map, for example, one venue is referred to as 'St John's Church Hall' in one place and 'St John's Community Hall' elsewhere. Similarly, the list of venues is not in complete alphabetical order.

5.6.3 Suggestions for improvements

Parents were generally satisfied with the frequency and level of information that they received from Sure Start; however, there was a perception that parents had less knowledge about new activities and one-off events, details of which are not included in the brochure or timetable. The reliance on advertising through posters and word of mouth within the Children's Centres restricts audiences for these events to frequent users of the service; the potential to engage hard to reach parents with one-off activities is immediately lost with this policy. While the cost of large mail shots may not be sustainable, new methods need to be employed to ensure that all aspects of the service are communicated to as wide an audience as possible.

Many parents relied on recommendations from staff and friends to determine which individual services they accessed. The preference for verbal information perhaps stems, in part, from the high number of parents with literacy difficulties in the area. This emphasises the importance of ensuring that information can still be obtained by parents in this way. There was evidence to show that most partners offer a verbal introduction to the publicity to newly registered parents, but some staff and partners reported that this was not always the case. Given the high number of parents with literacy difficulties in the area, staff need to be encouraged to facilitate parents'

familiarity with and confidence using the new publicity materials. The good communication links established with the parents' forum need to be maintained to ensure that accurate information is also circulated by word of mouth.

Referring back and forth between the two booklets caused frustration to some parents who generally reported a greater reliance on the timetable than the brochure for up to date information. While it is difficult to see how the publicity materials could be amalgamated into one document, providing more information on the timetable may alleviate some of the difficulties. The inclusion of very brief (two or three word) descriptions of activities on the timetable could facilitate increased reliance on the publicity amongst parents who might misplace the brochure. In addition the interdependency of the two documents could be made clearer, this is especially important to parents who receive no introduction to the materials from staff.

Several parents highlighted mistakes in the publicity, such as venue errors and omission of activities, which had impacted on their experience of the service. While it is important that the service adapts to the fast changing needs of the community, planning needs to be undertaken so as to ensure that information is as accurate as possible to achieve parent confidence in the materials.

5.7 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how staff, partners and parents have responded to the new programme of activities and the corresponding publicity materials at SSWCC. It would seem that transition to the new programme has been relatively smooth; partnership working between the centres and with partners is improved, easing some of the pressures on the service. Parents are benefiting from a more standardised, co-ordinated service in Widnes and the publicity materials have helped to create a better understanding of the programme amongst professionals and parents which has improved parent access to activities. However, there are some issues that SSWCC may like to consider when planning the next stages of the programme and the publicity.

- Effective communication between the two centres needs to continue to facilitate planning work and to provide a unified service to parents.
- Long-term service users need to remain a part of the consultation process in further planning to ensure that changes brought about by the new programme are communicated well and that the needs of this group are considered.

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- The timing of activities in relation to other parent commitments needs to be constantly reviewed. The spread across the timetable of activities for each age group should be monitored.
 - The strong corporate image created for SSWCC has facilitated parental engagement with services and needs to be maintained in all publicity and communication to help establish the Children's Centres.
 - The organisation of information within the publicity materials is helpful to parents but small changes, such as a more comprehensive index of activities in the brochure and more detail on the timetable would further facilitate use.
 - More detail and some corrections are needed on the map to ensure that parents can access new venues. Staff need to be better informed of the location of venues to advise parents.
 - Given the reliance on verbal information amongst parents, parent links need to be maintained to ensure the accuracy of information circulated by word of mouth and staff need to be encouraged to facilitate parental understanding of and familiarity with the new publicity materials.

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Appendix 1
Information sheet for staff and partners

An Evaluation of the Response to the Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres Programme

Widnes Children's Centres have commissioned the Centre for Public Health Research to explore the response of staff, partners and parents/carers to the recent changes in Sure Start service provision in Widnes and, in particular, the response to the promotional materials for the programme. You are being invited to take part in an interview with a researcher who will ask you for your views on the new programme. Before you decide if you want to take part, please read the following information.

What is the purpose of the study?

We want to explore staff and parent experiences of the programme of joint activities across Widnes and to explore the ways in which the publicity material is used by these groups of people.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are involved with the Widnes Children's Centre programme of activities and services.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation in an interview for the research is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

What happens if I take part?

An interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient for you. At the interview the researcher and you will discuss your professional experiences and views in relation to the services in Widnes Children's Centres. There are no right or wrong answers and you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. If you agree, the conversation will be taped so that the researcher can report what you have said accurately. The interview will take no longer than one hour.

What happens to the information collected?

The interview, together with data collected from other interviews, will be used to write a report about how staff and parents/carers feel about the Sure Start services in Widnes. The report will be given to Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres. No names or details that could identify you will be used. The interview tapes will be wiped at the end of the study.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact Katie Powell at the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ. Her phone number is 01244 512058.

Thank you for reading this.

Appendix 2
Interview schedule for staff

An Evaluation of the Response to Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres Programme

Interview Schedule Children's Centre staff

Personal information

- Could you start by telling me your job title and what your job involves?
- How long have you been working with Sure Start?
- How long have you been working with Sure Start in Widnes?

Thoughts on the development of the new programme

- Did you have any involvement in the development of the new programme of activities?
- Were you happy about the level of involvement that you had?

Partnerships

- Has the new programme led to increased partnership work with other Sure Start staff?
- If so, have these partnerships been successful?
- What are the benefits of the partnership approach?
- What are the disadvantages of the partnership approach?

- Is evaluation of the services carried out in the same way as before?
- Is the current evaluation method sufficient?

Thoughts on the running of the new programme

- What are the main differences between the old and new programme?
- What were the objectives for setting up a Widnes-wide programme of activities/services?
- Have these objectives been achieved?
- Were there any unexpected consequences with the new programme?
- What is good about the new programme?
- What is not good about it?
- Do you think that the new programme of activities meets the needs of parents/carers in Widnes?
(Times/venues/facilities)
- Do you think that the service has been affected by the new programme?
(Number of people attending/accessibility of services)
- How do you think the programme of activities could be improved?
(What changes would make the service more accessible, particularly to hard-to-reach groups?)

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Activities brochure

- Have you used the new Activities and Services brochure with parents/carers?
(Refer to the brochure)
- How, when and where is the brochure disseminated to parents/carers?
- What do you think of the brochure? What is good and not good about it?
- How have parents/carers responded to the brochure?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?

- What do you think of the layout and organisation of the information in the brochure?
- Do you think that the Useful Numbers section is useful?
- Is the Guide to Activities section understandable and useful to parents?

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Timetable

- Have you used the new Widnes Children's Centre Timetable with parents/carers?
(Refer to the timetable)
- How, when and where is the brochure disseminated to parents/carers?
- What do you think of the timetable? What is good and not good about it?
- How have parents responded to the timetable?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?
- Do you think that it is easy for parents to get the information that they need from it?
- Do you think that the map is helpful to parents?
- Is the information about booking the sessions clear?

Thoughts on the old publicity

- Did you use the old publicity material?
- What did you think of the old publicity material
(Show copies)
- How do the old and new publicity compare?
- How else could the services be publicised?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the services at Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?

Appendix 3
Interview schedule for partners

An Evaluation of the Response to Sure Start Widnes Children's Centre Programme

Interview Schedule Children's Centre partners

Personal information

- Could you describe the work that you do with Sure Start?
- How long have you been working with Sure Start?
- How long have you been working with Sure Start in Widnes?

Thoughts on the programme

- Did you, or your organisation, have any involvement in the development of the new programme of activities?
- Has the new programme changed your partnership work with Sure Start?
- What are the good things, if any, about your partnership with Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?
- What are the problematic things, if any, about your partnership with Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?
- What would facilitate partnership working with Sure Start?

- Do you think that the programme of activities meets the needs of parents/carers in Widnes?
(Times/venues/facilities)
- How do you think that the service has been affected by the new programme?
(Number of people at attending/accessibility of services)
- How do you think the programme of activities could be improved?
(What changes would make the service more accessible, particularly to hard-to-reach groups?)

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Activities brochure

- Have you used the new Activities and Services brochure with parents/carers?
(Refer to the brochure)
- What do you think of the brochure? What is good and not good about it?
- How have parents/carers responded to the brochure?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?
- What do you think of the layout and organisation of the information in the brochure?
- Do you think that the Useful Numbers section is useful?
- Is the Guide to Activities section understandable and useful to parents?

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Timetable

- Have you used the new Widnes Children's Centre Timetable with parents/carers?
(Refer to the timetable)
- What do you think of the timetable? What is good and not good about it?
- How have parents responded to the timetable?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?

- Do you think that it is easy for parents to get the information that they need from it?
- Do you think that the map is helpful to parents?
- Is the information about booking the sessions clear?

Thoughts on the old publicity

- Did you use the old publicity material?
- What did you think of the old publicity material (Show copies)
- How do the old and new publicity compare?
- How else could the services be publicised?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the services at Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?

Appendix 4
Information sheet for parents

An Evaluation of the Response to the Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres Programme

Widnes Children's Centres have asked the Centre for Public Health Research to explore staff and parents/carers' thoughts about Sure Start services in Widnes. We will be exploring what parents think about the programme of activities and the leaflets used to advertise them. In order to do this a researcher will be visiting some sessions to talk to some parents/carers. If you are not happy for the researcher to be present at the session, please mention it to a member of staff.

What is the purpose of the study?

We want to explore staff and parent/carer experiences of the programme of activities for Widnes and their thoughts about the advertising leaflets.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you have accessed an activity/service at a Widnes Children's Centre. We would like to hear what you think about the services.



Do I have to take part?

It is up to you whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind at any time without giving a reason. This will not affect your entitlement to use any of the Sure Start Widnes Children's Centre Services.



What happens if I take part?

During the interview the researcher and you will talk about your experience of the services at Widnes Children's Centres and your opinion of the advertising leaflets. There are no right or wrong answers and you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. If you agree, the conversation will be taped so that the researcher can report what you have said accurately. The interview will take no longer than half an hour.

What happens to the information collected?

The interview, together with data collected from other interviews, will be used to write a report about how staff and parents/carers feel about the Sure Start services in Widnes. The report will be given to Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres. No names or details that could identify you will be used. The interview tapes will be wiped at the end of the study.



Who can I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact Katie Powell at the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ. Her phone number is 01244 512058.

Thank you for reading this.

Appendix 5
Interview schedule for parents

An Evaluation of the Response to Sure Start Widnes Children's Centre Programme

Interview Schedule Parents/Carers

Personal information

- How many children do you have and how old are they?
- Where do you live?
- When did you start using Sure Start services?

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Activities brochure

- How did you find out about the services at Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?
- What motivated you to attend an activity?
- Have you seen and used the new Widnes Children's Centres Activities and Services brochure?
(Refer to the brochure)
- What do you think of the brochure? What is good and not good about it?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?
- What do you think of the layout and organisation of the information in the brochure?
- Do you think that the Useful Numbers section is useful?
- Is the Guide to Activities section understandable and useful?

Thoughts on the publicity of the programme: Timetable

- Have you seen and used the new Widnes Children's Centre Timetable?
(Refer to the timetable)
- What do you think of the timetable? What is good and not good about it?
- Is it useful and why or why not?
- Is it user-friendly and why or why not?
- Is it easy to get the information you need from it?
- Is the map helpful?
- Is the information about booking the sessions clear?

Thoughts on the old publicity

- Did you use the old publicity material?
(Show copy)
- What did you think of it?
- How do the old and new publicity compare?
- How else could the services be publicised?

Thoughts on the programme

- Which services have you used?
(Refer to list of services, how often, over what length of time?)
- Does the programme of activities meet your needs?
(Times/venues/facilities)
- (If the service was used before changes) Has your experience of the service been affected by the changes to the programme?
- How do you think the programme of activities could be improved?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the services at Sure Start Widnes Children's Centres?