

The Sure Start Journey

Dan Racher



department for
children, schools and families

Why Sure Start?

- **A recognition that the quality of services varied hugely across localities, often with poor coordination.**
- **Services particularly dislocated for under-fours and their families.**
- **Every child should have the opportunity to succeed.**
- **A fundamental focus on tackling disadvantage and multi-deprivation was needed.**
- **The costs – both moral and financial – of the failure of Government to act were far too high.**



Sure Start – a history

- A fundamental focus on tackling disadvantage and multi-deprivation through integrated services.
- A experimental Government programme called ‘Sure Start’ was created.
- Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) offered a range of integrated services.
- SSLPs run by local partnerships, both the voluntary and community sector and statutory services like health and social services.
- Starting in 1999, original target of 250 trailblazer SSLPs by March 2002, expanded so by end of 2003 524 SSLPs.
- Target of target of 3,500 SSCCs by 2010 – one for every community. Progressive Universalism in action.



NESS Reporting

- **NESS commissioned in early 2001.**
- **Three guiding questions:**
 - 1. Do existing services change?**
 - 2. Are delivered services improved?**
 - 3. Do children, families & communities benefit?**
- **Four key dimensions:**
 - Local context analysis
 - Implementation
 - Impact
 - Cost-effectiveness



Using evidence

- **Sure Start strong record of using evaluation and evidence to help steer policy. But what does this actually mean?**
- **To shine a light on progress: NESS a key part of this – showing us where we were having an impact and where we aren't – yet!**
- **To help guide action: 'Evidence-based policy making' – the challenge of central policy making and local delivery**
 - Findings feed into policy making...
 - And into practice...



Early impact of evidence

- **Early NESS reporting (starting in 2002) considered SSLP effectiveness.**
- **Found some more effective in achieving than others – marked variability between the best and worst performing SSLPs.**
- **In doing so, identified best practice and conditions for success.**
- **Evidence also pointed to consistent weaknesses in delivery.**
- **Government responded decisively:**
- **SSLPs became Sure Start Children’s Centres, a fundamental change in the programme to address these:**
 - **From local partnerships to local government control**
 - **From a variety of services to a defined ‘core offer’ of services**
 - **A much stronger on improving outcomes for children**



Using evidence to drive policy change

- **Using outreach – reaching the most disadvantaged members of the community as an example.**
- **NESS reports showed importance of reaching the very hardest to reach members of the community. This is hard. So:**
- **We issued new, revised practice guidance with much stronger messages on engaging the most excluded families – with outreach key to this.**
- **The guidance highlights effective outreach strategies, as well as practical examples and case studies of what works well.**
- **We allocated additional funding from 2008-9 to enable two additional outreach workers in the most disadvantaged areas.**
- **We committed in the Children's Plan to review outreach to improve the training and development of outreach workers.**



Using evidence to drive local change

- **Policy is only as powerful if implemented in local areas.**
- **But embedding a learning and ‘evidence-based policy making’ culture in local areas more of a challenge - keen to tackle “policy and practice desert”**
- **Weaknesses in local infrastructure: leadership capacity, performance management, effective governance...**
- **Weaknesses in local practice: effectiveness of outreach, use of interventions shown to work, involving the whole community...**
- **Government produced a range of materials based on evidence: practice guidance drawing from thematic reports, summary of evaluation evidence.**
- **Government commissioned delivery partner (TFC) to help drive and embed change locally – TFC strong focus on spreading ‘best practice’.**



“It is to the credit of Sure Start that they have been responsive to research findings and modified services accordingly... Even though such improvements have a long way to go, the result of these changes is that children and families in the current study may well have been exposed to *more effective services* than those encountered by children and families in the earlier phase of inquiry.”

The Impact Of Sure Start Local Programmes On Three Year Olds And Their Families, NESS, 2008.



department for
children, schools and families

But it isn't just about policy and practice

- **Research evidence operates in a public sphere – research is often a de facto judgement of success.**
 - **It is interpreted and reported by the media.**
 - **It can drive public opinion of the worth and success of a policy.**
 - **It can influence those who work in a policy.**
- **The Sure Start experience is a good example of this.**



Defining a programme: the media coverage of the 2005 impact study

- **The Guardian: “Doubts over value of £3bn Sure Start - Flagship government scheme to help deprived youngsters may be failing.”**
- **Daily Mail: “A less than Sure Start” & “How Sure Start project is 'failing poor children’”**
- **Community Care: “Sure Start is failing to improve children’s lives”**
- **BBC Online: “'Limited impact' of child project”**
- **Northern Echo: “£3bn Sure Start is failing – study”**



Redefining a programme: media coverage of the 2008 findings

Some Positive

- **TES – “Sure Start boosts pre-schooler's social attributes.”**
- **Community Care – “Sure Start evaluation: better parenting and more use of support reported.”**
- **C&YP Now – “Evaluation highlights benefits of Sure Start areas for children” and “Sure Start evaluation positive about impact.”**

“The latest evaluation of Sure Start has quashed previous suggestions that the programme has a negative effect on disadvantaged children.”

- **BBC Online – “Sure Start young behave better”**
- **Financial Times – “Research points to benefits of 'Sure Start'”**
- **The Guardian – “Sure Start success in helping children of poor families hailed”**



Or not completely redefining a programme...

Some not so positive coverage

- **The Times – “Sure Start doubts”**
- **Daily Telegraph – “Sure Start plan 'failing to meet targets”.**
- **The Independent – “How Government’s plans to end child poverty were botched.”**
- **The Guardian – “Ministers put extra effort into Sure Start”**
“The Government is to revamp its multi-billion pound Sure Start programme which supports parents in deprived communities after research revealed the services were making only 'modest' improvements to children's lives.”



Next Steps: making it happen

- Key challenge is to build on success in establishing children's centres by driving up quality in every centre.
- Key areas to focus on:
 - Reaching all families - personalise services and use data to understand community
 - Working together - parents and private, voluntary, public sector especially health and JCP
 - Measuring impact - Use Performance Management System, Focus on quality and outcomes, self-evaluation
- Sure Start Children's Centres Leader Network





department for
children, schools and families