



Sure Start delivery in 2012/3: Innovative delivery models and harnessing the power of the community

Produced by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start

Innovative delivery models and harnessing the power of the community

APPG Sure Start: Inquiry Session, 22nd November 2012

Background

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start was founded in June 2010 in order to enable Parliamentarians to build the understanding and promote the development of Sure Start centres, and to share best practice across the country.

Over the past year, the Group has invited representatives from local authorities, voluntary sector providers, health professionals, parents groups and early years experts to provide evidence to inquiry sessions designed to shape and influence the policy and delivery of Sure Start Children's Centres.

In February 2012, the Group published an interim report into its findings to date¹, and produced a report of its last session "Delivering for Families" in November². During 2013 the Group will publish a further series of reports which will aim to influence and inform the continuing development of Sure Start Children's Centres and the services they provide.

Innovative delivery models and harnessing the power of the community

In November 2012, the Group met to take evidence on a range of innovative delivery models being undertaken by the small but rising number of social enterprise and co-operative run children's centres. The Group also heard from Knowsley local authority and volunteers and managers from Action for Children who set out how they have seized the opportunity to work with their local communities to enhance service delivery, and embed parents and volunteers in decision making processes.

"Innovative delivery models and harnessing the power of the community" heard from the following witnesses:

- Lesley Hollinshead, Children and Families Services Manager, Knowsley;
- Rachel Howard, Children's Centre Leader, Action for Children;
- Vanessa, Volunteer, Action for Children;
- Jenny Deeks, Children's Centre Manager, Coin Street Children's Centre;
- Karen Cartwright, Founder, Beanies Cafe;
- Hina Shah, Founder, Beanies Cafe.

Key themes and findings from the session are set out below.

¹ <http://www.4children.org.uk/News/Detail/Interim-APPG-report-on-Sure-Start-network>

² <http://www.4children.org.uk/Page/APPG-on-Sure-Start-Childrens-Centres>

Harnessing the Power of the Community

Key issues:

- **Maximising the positive impact of volunteering**
- **Running and managing an effective volunteer programme**
- **The benefits of volunteering to volunteers**

Maximising the positive impact of volunteering

The session heard evidence from witnesses Lesley Hollinshead, Children and Families Services Manager, Knowsley; Rachel Howard, Children's Centre Leader, Action for Children; and Vanessa, Volunteer, Action for Children.

There is a long history of parental engagement in early years services with many of the first playgroups set up by groups of parents and grandparents responding to lack of services in their area. Parental engagement is beneficial to parents and children, with parents able to spend time with their children in a positive learning environment as well as developing their skills and allowing them to engage further in the community.

Parental involvement has been a feature of Sure Start Children's Centres from the beginning although it is acknowledged that some Centres have been more community orientated and taken a more comprehensive approach to volunteering and parental engagement than others. Evidence from 2012 Children's Centre Census³ shows that the number of Children's Centres using volunteers has increased substantially between April 2011 and April 2012, with more than 60% of Centres saying the number of volunteers they are using had increased. 50% also said that the number of hours being worked by volunteers had also increased.

Evidence presented by Knowsley and Action for Children set out examples of what is possible to achieve by developing and delivering a holistic volunteering model.

What kind of activities were volunteers undertaking?

1. Outreach work with families who could benefit from accessing centre services. This included outreach to traditionally hard to reach groups including travellers.
2. Organising events e.g. the summer holiday activity programme
3. Delivering open access activity session e.g. Stay and Play

Key benefits for the Children's Centre and the Community

1. Helps Local Authorities and Children's Centres build a stronger relationships with the communities they serve.

³ Sure Start Children's Centres 2012. 4Children.

Witnesses reported that volunteers were highly effective at taking the message of the Children's Centre and what is on offer out to the community, but equally importantly they were able to use their experience and knowledge of the local area to help shape services that were responsive to community needs.

This process could help raise the 'aspirations' of communities who could see practical ways in which they could get involved and shape services. Individuals were empowered to give 'something back'. This was described as 'infectious' with the positive experiences of volunteers leading to greater interest in volunteering opportunities from others.

2. Improves the reach to those who could benefit most from the services on offer

It was highlighted that because volunteers can avoid being tarnished by some of the stigma attached to some professionals working with children and families – particularly anyone who is associated with social services - they are able to open the door to the Centre to a wider group of people. Knowsley described their use of parents as outreach workers – allowing them to provide support to parents “from people like them, [people] that they could identify with”.

Action for Children reported that with the use of volunteers they had managed to increase their 'reach' – the percentage of families with children under 5 in their area – to 97.5% at some Centres.

3. Improves the sustainability of universal services and allows paid staff to spend more time on targeted services to families who need them

Knowsley Council reported that they now had more than 100 volunteers working in Children's Centres. This huge additional resource was deployed to support and deliver open access services allowing qualified family support workers to spend more time with families who were 'just coping' – a key target under the Knowsley strategic plan for children and family services.

Since 2010 Knowsley have been able to double 'reach' and Centre registrations and increase improve the number and quality of activities at the same time as reducing costs. Action for Children estimate that volunteers contribute the equivalent of £1.2m every year across the organisation⁴

But speakers consistently stressed that using volunteers should not be viewed as simple cost cutting measure. The holistic use of volunteers alongside an ambitious commitment to community and parental engagement offers a different approach – a 'different insight'.

⁴ Evaluation of the Impact of Volunteers in Action for Children Children's Centres, Action for Children, May 2012

Benefits of volunteering to volunteers

1. Improved self-confidence and improved parenting

“Volunteering made me grow as a parent”

“Before I [began volunteering] was buried within myself”

“After the training session I became an active part of the Sure Start system – I became a sponge for knowledge and enthusiasm”

Parents describing their volunteering experiences

2. Improved employability

Witnesses stressed that volunteers are not there to “clean paint pots”. They work as integral members of the Children’s Centre team. “We want our volunteers to think ‘I could do your job’.”

The provision of accredited training, an active support network and a chance to develop key transferrable skills sit at the heart of successful volunteering programmes – allowing volunteers to both substantially contribute to the Children’s Centre and improve their employability. Braunstone Children’s Centre reported that almost 100% of their volunteers move into work following their involvement at the centre. “Our volunteers don’t stay long – because they go into work”

Delivering a comprehensive volunteer programme

Key components need to be in place including:

- A volunteer agreement – this sets out expectations on both the Centre and individual and creates an atmosphere of professionalism.
- What is required of volunteers should be flexible and agreed in discussion with the volunteer. Action for Children volunteers give between 3 hours and five days a week.
- Accredited training and qualifications are part of the ‘deal’. Action for Children have a 9 week volunteer induction programme, 1 afternoon per week, which introduces volunteering, the Children’s Centre and the organisation.
- A realistic attitude to building up the number of volunteers. It can take more than a year to establish a solid base of volunteers and an effective programme.

Conclusion

All participants stressed the mutual benefits that well resourced and developed volunteering programmes can deliver to Centres, families and volunteers – and recommended that all Centres work to develop a volunteer programme for the benefit of their service users, and to enhance the community support they offer in the years ahead.

Innovative Delivery Models

Key issues:

- **Adopting a business focussed approach**
- **Measuring outcomes**
- **Partnership working**

While the majority of children's centres continue to be delivered by local authorities, or by voluntary sector organisations on behalf of local authorities, an increasing number are beginning to embrace more diverse delivery models including cooperative run centres and centres run as social enterprises.

The session heard evidence from two such organisations: the Coin Street Children's Centre, which is run as a social enterprise as part of the work undertaken by the Coin Street Community Builders; and Beanies Cafe, which offers paid party and play services to parents and invests the profits in parenting workshops and training for under-privileged young people. Both centres raised a number of ways in which children's centres could benefit from a social enterprise approach, which are outlined further below.

Adopting a business focussed approach

While all Sure Start centres offer the majority of their services free to parents, and over 60% do not charge for any services at all⁵, the witnesses raised a number of ways in which centres could build business practices into their approach in order to maximise their effectiveness, and ensure their resources were having a significant impact.

Coin Street stressed that centres should not be embarrassed about adopting a businesslike approach to service delivery, and should go out of their way to effectively market their services, and drive up participation. Centres should engage with their detractors as much, if not more than their supporters, in order to drive up quality and resolve any ongoing issues with service delivery.

Beanies stressed that centres should focus on 'sweating their assets', ensuring that the space was used as often as possible, and considering renting the space out to community groups or sharing it with other service providers to maximise impact. They also suggested that social media should be used as proactively as possible, and that centres should collect as many details of their users and potential users as possible, in order to direct them to services they could benefit from, and alert them to community and parenting focussed sessions.

Finally, both witnesses spoke of their support for further business skills training for children's centres, and called on the Department for Education to provide additional support in that area.

⁵ Sure Start Children's Centre Census, 2012, 4Children

Measuring Outcomes

While support for Sure Start centres is almost universal, there have been a number of questions in recent years regarding the outcomes that centres deliver, and whether funds have been efficiently allocated to services that truly deliver. Earlier this month, Naomi Eisenstadt presented evidence to the Education Select Committee in which she called for more outcome focused delivery in Sure Start centres, and a clear cost-benefit analysis of the services provided.

Coin Street children's centre addressed these criticisms in their evidence – calling for centres to take a proactive approach to measuring outcomes, and to use the data that they gathered to influence the services they offer, and their allocation of resources. The witnesses stressed that services should not be delivered simply because people enjoy them – they must be outcome focussed and effective. Beanies stressed that in their set-up they can simply stop providing sessions which do not prove popular, or alter their delivery to ensure they regain popularity with parents.

The witnesses, and some members of the audience, were keen to stress however that a holistic approach to outcome measurement should be undertaken – and that softer outcomes should not be ignored. Coin Street discussed their delivery of back to work support, which often began with people skills including helping people to introduce themselves and speak confidently to people they had just met. While sessions at that level do not routinely result in employment, they do provide a 'distance travelled' measure that work in combination with other factors to deliver real results.

Partnership Working

The witnesses also discussed the importance of partnership working, both to increase the number of parents who were attracted to the services they offered, and also to take advantage of the skills available in the community.

Both witnesses described their partnerships with arts organisations, and the additional benefits that these brought to their services. Coin Street described their partnership with the National Theatre which aimed to improve parents' inter-personal skills, and help them work together, in order to prepare them for work, while Beanies Cafe described their partnership with the Brit School, and the additional attention and prestige it brought to their operation – including driving talented students into childcare delivery.

Both operations stressed that there were often organisations looking to work in partnership in local areas, and that centres should do what they can to reach out and build productive links with local community groups.

Coin Street also described their innovative partnership delivery model with social workers – outlining their joined up approach to case work, and directing parents in need of additional support to their children's centre services. This set up, facilitated by strong information sharing arrangements and the co-location of social workers alongside health and children's services staff, allowed the centre to expand its outreach considerably and

make contact with even the hardest to reach parents. The witnesses also described the beneficial outcomes that directing parents to children's centre services had, particularly where this helped them to exercise greater control over their lives, and continue to care for their children.

Though partnership working was not directly linked to the centres' statuses as social enterprise operations, both witnesses felt that their outward looking business approach to delivery and their focus on efficiency helped them to build productive and mutually beneficial partnerships with external organisations.

Recommendations:

As a result of the evidence gathered at the 'Innovative delivery models and harnessing the power of the community' session, the All Party Sure Start Group has made the following recommendations:

To Government:

- The Department for Education should provide children's centres and local authorities with support to develop their business skills, and improve centre's sustainability.

To Local Authorities:

- Local Authorities should support centres to build a responsive, innovative volunteering model to engage local families, and improve service delivery.
- Local Authorities should work to co-locate health and social work services within children's centres, or work to ensure information sharing pathways are efficient and effective where this is impossible.

To Children's Centres:

- Centres should adopt a business approach to service delivery, even when they were not seeking to maximize revenue, in order to increase the efficiency and reach of their service delivery.
- Centres should work to capture and measure the impact of their services on local families, and use the results they secure to deliver more of the services with the greatest positive impact.
- Centres should work to defeminise their service provision to help involve fathers more in caring for their children, and put them in contact with family services.