

**Centre for Public Health Research**

**Engaging parents and carers  
with Sure Start New Steps**

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## Table of contents

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	i
<b>Table of contents</b>	ii
<b>Executive summary</b>	iv
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
1.1	Sure Start local programmes 1
1.2	Sure Start New Steps 1
1.3	Aim and objectives of the study 2
1.4	Structure of the report 3
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Reaching parents and carers</b>
2.1	Introduction 4
2.2	Contact with parents and carers 4
2.3	Parents' use of services 5
2.4	Strategies to engage parents 5
2.5	Barriers to engagement 7
2.6	Hard-to-reach groups 7
2.7	Conclusion 8
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Study design and methodology</b>
3.1	Introduction 9
3.2	Data collection 9
3.2.1	Interviews with the Programme Manager and health professionals 9
3.2.2	Interviews with partner agencies 10
3.2.3	Interviews with parents and carers using Sure Start New Steps activities 11
3.2.4	Interviews with registered parents and carers who do not use Sure Start New Steps 12
3.2.5	Interviews with parents and carers who are eligible for Sure Start New Steps but are not registered 12
3.3	Ethics 13
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Findings from the health professionals</b>
4.1	Introduction 14
4.2	Knowledge of Sure Start New Steps 14
4.3	Determining eligibility for Sure Start 14
4.4	Introducing Sure Start to parents and carers 15
4.5	Perceptions of why families may not use Sure Start New Steps 17
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Findings from partner agencies</b>
5.1	Introduction 19
5.2	Introducing and promoting Sure Start New Steps 19
5.3	Views of Sure Start New Steps publicity 20

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<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Findings from parents and carers</b>	
6.1	Introduction	22
6.2	How parents heard about Sure Start New Steps	22
	6.2.1 Health professionals	23
	6.2.2 Sure Start worker	24
	6.2.3 Other agencies	24
	6.2.4 Informal sources	24
	6.2.5 Leaflets and posters	24
6.3	Promotion and publicity	25
	6.3.1 Promotion of Sure Start	25
	6.3.2 Publicity material	26
6.4	Registering with Sure Start New Steps	27
	6.4.1 When parents registered	27
	6.4.2 Reasons for registering	27
6.5	Reasons for not using Sure Start New Steps	28
	6.5.1 Impact of work	29
	6.5.2 Timing of activities	29
	6.5.3 Confidence and contacts	30
	6.5.4 Perception of activities	30
	6.5.5 Practical considerations	30
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	
7.1	Introduction	31
7.2	Awareness of Sure Start New Steps among parents and carers	31
7.3	Promotion of Sure Start New Steps by health professionals	31
7.4	Registration with Sure Start New Steps	33
7.5	Families who did not use Sure Start New Steps	34
7.6	Publicity and information	34
7.7	Conclusion	35
<b>References</b>		37
<b>Appendices</b>		
<b>Appendix 1</b>	Interview schedule for health professionals	39
<b>Appendix 2</b>	Interview schedule for partner agencies promoting Sure Start New Steps	40
<b>Appendix 3</b>	Interview schedule for parents and carers using Sure Start New Steps	41
<b>Appendix 4</b>	Interview schedule for registered parents and carers not using Sure Start New Steps	42

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## **Executive summary**

### **Introduction**

Sure Start New Steps is one of five local programmes in Halton. It is a fifth round programme, established in 2002, and is based at Kingsway Learning Centre, Widnes. The staff at Sure Start New Steps have had some concerns about the number of families they are reaching. A recent parent satisfaction survey indicated that although general awareness of Sure Start New Steps was high, 18 respondents (12% of those taking part in the survey) were unaware of the Sure Start programme in their area, although 14 of this group had actually used Sure Start New Steps services. Anecdotal information reported by staff at Sure Start New Steps also suggests that a number of eligible families are not registered with the programme and are unaware of its existence. Concerns have therefore been raised about the strategies used to inform parents and carers about Sure Start New Steps and how systematically and effectively its activities are introduced and promoted by health professionals and others working with the eligible population. The aim of this study was therefore to explore how Sure Start New Steps is promoted and publicised to parents and carers, in order to inform future marketing strategies.

### **Study design and methodology**

This was a small scale exploratory study using qualitative research techniques, with Interviews as the data collection method. Interviews allow a degree of flexibility and adaptation: in this study, this was necessary to explore how people were informed about services, the ways in which the services were presented and how subtle variations in this might influence perceptions and uptake of a service. The interviews also explored real or perceived barriers to using services. Information was collected from the Sure Start New Steps Programme Manager, two different groups of health professionals (midwives and health visitors), representatives from organisations where there was a service level agreement with Sure Start New Steps (partner agencies), and parents and carers. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face at a convenient location for the interviewees, but interviews with parents who were registered with Sure Start New Steps but who did not use activities, and interviews with representatives from organisations where there was a service level agreement with Sure Start New Steps, were conducted on the telephone. The researcher took notes during the interviews: these notes were transcribed and a thematic analysis of the interviews was undertaken.

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## **Findings and conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that Sure Start New Steps is promoted largely successfully to the community, and that some of the people who do not access services do not do so because they have decided that they are not appropriate for them. However, there are some issues that the Sure Start New Steps programme may like to consider when planning future marketing strategies.

- The experience of midwives, health visitors and parents suggests that a lot of information has to be taken in at initial contacts between health professionals and prospective parents and this may not be the best time to go into detail about Sure Start services.
- Possibly linked to the previous point, midwives do not seem to follow up on promoting Sure Start activities: there is a big drive to register women and then they do not appear to speak about Sure Start again.
- Where home visits from Sure Start workers take place they are very positively received, so there may be capacity for early referral from midwives and health visitors to at least some families.
- Registration of families with Sure Start New Steps appears to be relatively late - usually when the child is a few weeks or possibly months old. Thus, the effectiveness of services targeted at pregnant mothers is compromised. Attempting to register mothers earlier could be a useful priority.
- The findings of this study reflect other research which has indicated that families who do not use activities have received regular information about the programme: it is not a basic lack of information that stops people although there may be issues about its content.
- At least one parent who had not used Sure Start New Steps services but had received promotional material such as newsletters commented that the content of the newsletter had been useful. Therefore, although not measurable, the programme may be 'reaching' more than the individuals who attend specific activities and this underlines the importance of continuing to produce informative promotional material.
- There is some suggestion that families see the benefits of Sure Start beginning when a child is older: it may be that the toddler development aspects of Sure Start have come across more strongly than the possible benefits for younger children and their parents.

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- The situation may change with children's centres: services will not be geographically based and so may be easier to promote as they will be truly universal.



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Sure Start local programmes

Sure Start is a government initiative, introduced in April 1999. The aim of the initiative was to improve the health and wellbeing of children and families who lived in the most disadvantaged areas of the country so that children were ready to thrive when they started school. The current aims of Sure Start are: to improve the health and emotional development of young children; to increase the availability of child care; and to support parents as parents and in their aspirations for employment (Sure Start, 2005).

There are 524 Sure Start local programmes in England (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, 2004). Each local programme has received guidance from the Sure Start Unit which stated that they should see an increasing number of children and families in their first operational year, until they were in contact with every family with children under four in their area (Sure Start Unit, 2002). The expectation was that a fully operational programme should see between a third and a quarter of all children aged nought to three years living in their area each month, including a 'steady' number (around 20%) of children who had never been in touch with the programme before (Sure Start Unit, 2002, para. 4.17). Thus, the extent to which each local programme can successfully engage members of its eligible population in services is seen as a major determinant of its success in improving the lives of families with young children.

### 1.2 Sure Start New Steps

Sure Start New Steps is one of five local programmes in Halton. It is a fifth round programme, established in 2002, and is based at Kingsway Learning Centre, Widnes. Sure Start New Steps covers parts of the WA8 postcode area of Widnes. Halton, Appleton, Kingsway and Riverside wards are all within this area and are ranked 14<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> respectively in an Index of Multiple Deprivation for the 21 wards within Halton. In addition to this, both Kingsway and Riverside ranked in the top 5% of English wards for multiple deprivation (Halton Borough Council, 2005).

There is some lack of clarity regarding the exact number of eligible families, that is, families with children aged less than four years, living in the area covered by Sure

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Start New Steps. The Programme Manager estimates that there are approximately 710 eligible families living in the catchment, 600 of whom are registered with Sure Start New Steps. However, data contained on the Child Health Database, held by Halton Primary Care Trust, indicate that there are 900 eligible families. Although a great deal of information is distributed via the Child Health Database to these families, the Sure Start Programme Manager reported that a significant amount is returned stating that the individual is not resident at the address.

The staff at Sure Start New Steps have had some concerns about the number of families they are reaching. A recent parent satisfaction survey indicated that although general awareness of Sure Start New Steps was high, 18 respondents (12% of those taking part in the survey) were unaware of the Sure Start programme in their area, although 14 of this group had actually used Sure Start New Steps services (Alford & Perry, 2005). Anecdotal information reported by staff at Sure Start New Steps also suggests that a number of eligible families are not registered with the programme and are unaware of its existence (personal communication, Programme Manager, October 6, 2005). Concerns have therefore been raised about the strategies used to inform parents and carers about Sure Start New Steps and how systematically and effectively its activities are introduced and promoted by health professionals and others working with the eligible population.

The parent satisfaction survey also revealed that 70% of registered respondents would like more information about Sure Start services. This result emphasises the need to regularly inform and update parents and carers about the activities available and to publicise activities effectively among the local community in ways that will encourage people to attend.

### **1.3 Aim and objectives of the study**

The aim of this study was to explore how Sure Start New Steps is promoted and publicised to parents and carers, in order to inform future marketing strategies. The objectives were:

- to explore how health professionals, and others working with the eligible population (partner agencies), introduce Sure Start New Steps to parents and carers;
- to explore knowledge and awareness of Sure Start New Steps among parents and carers;

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- to explore how parents first heard about the New Steps programme and to gather their views on how Sure Start services are publicised;
  - to explore perceived barriers to engaging with Sure Start New Steps.

#### **1.4 Structure of the report**

This report is organised into a number of chapters. Chapter 2 discusses the issues which may underlie an individual family's use of a service such as Sure Start and Chapter 3 outlines the study design and methods used during the research. The following three chapters present the findings from the interviews with the health professionals (Chapter 4), the partner agencies (Chapter 5) and the parents and carers (Chapter 6). The final part of the report, Chapter 7, summarises the findings and discusses the implications of the research for the programme.

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## Chapter 2

### Reaching parents and carers

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, research that has been carried out as part of the national evaluation of Sure Start and in some local programmes in relation to publicising services and engaging with the community is presented. This serves as a useful background to the current study.

#### 2.2 Contact with parents and carers

The difficulties faced by early childhood interventions in reaching their intended beneficiaries have been well documented (Sanderson, 2002; Philo, McCormick & CPAG, 1995). The national evaluation of Sure Start has suggested that operations in successful Sure Start local programmes reflect the reality that reaching out is not a one-off event but an ongoing process, which aims to engage people in different ways by the use of a continuing programme of publicity (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005).

The national evaluators of Sure Start have described connections and linkages between Sure Start and eligible parents and carers as a five point continuum. These points, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may be overlapping, are described below.

- Making initial contact: this is the first point on the continuum and may be conducted through consultation with the community. The initial phase may include a range of strategies from leafleting campaigns to face-to-face outreach work.
- Introduction to the service: this describes the work carried out by Sure Start to introduce individual parents to the programme after having learnt about Sure Start.
- Autonomous take up of one Sure Start service: this is the point at which parents decide to use the service on their own.
- Autonomous take up of more than one service: this represents the period when the parent/carer is confident enough to take up more Sure Start services. It is important that programmes continue to try to engage parents at this point.

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- Autonomous take up of other (non Sure Start) services: this is the stage at which the parent/carer is confident enough to look beyond the geographically targeted services of the Sure Start local programme and explore services provided by other agencies.  
(The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005).

Along this continuum there will be parents and carers who make contact with Sure Start and, whilst some will go on to access a service, others will not.

### **2.3 Parents' use of services**

The national evaluation of Sure Start suggests that irrespective of how creative or extensive the range of activities provided by a Sure Start local programme, not all parents will engage with a programme on the same basis and so a range of strategies are needed to attract parents and families (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005). The national evaluation case studies illustrate three broad styles of service use among parents and carers, as outlined below.

- Parents who autonomously take up services and who require very little encouragement to engage with local programmes and access a particular service.
- Parents who need encouragement to use services: these parents may be reluctant to access services because of isolation or a lack of confidence. Some may have encountered negative reactions with mainstream services. Some local programmes use a 'befriender' to encourage these groups to access services, or provide practical support to do so, such as crèche facilities, transport or interpreters.
- Parents who take up services under particular conditions: these parents are unlikely to be encouraged to use services by the strategies described above. This may be due to their physical circumstances, which may include isolation, physical illness or a psychological condition or as a result of an earlier negative experience of using services.

### **2.4 Strategies to engage parents**

Sure Start local programmes have used a variety of different strategies to inform parents and carers about Sure Start and to engage them with activities. These include formal strategies such as working with other agencies and health

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professionals who come into contact with the parents and carers of young children. Many Sure Start local programmes have entered into agreements with other local agencies whereby the agencies agree to promote the work of Sure Start (Sure Start, 2005). This can be active promotion, with agencies recommending Sure Start activities to eligible families, or passive promotion through displaying leaflets and posters. In addition, partnerships with health professionals can prove successful in terms of offering opportunities to engage parents. Research shows that infants in some developed countries have a higher proportion of general practitioner visits during the first 12 months of their life than at any other period (Goldfeld, Wright & Oberklaid, 2003). Both routine visits to health care providers and visits when the child is unwell provide opportunities for anticipatory guidance, early detection and intervention (Goldfeld et al., 2003) and this is also a forum where parents and carers in Sure Start areas can be informed about local activities.

Other strategies such as open days, door-knocking campaigns and community consultation exercises have been found to be useful in informing people about Sure Start. For example, consultation exercises have been used to identify the needs of local parents and carers, build parents' confidence to use activities and raise awareness in the community about the programme (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005). Many local programmes have also adopted opportunistic approaches to promote their activities. These include promotional stands at local events or venues that parents of young children are likely to frequent and approaching people outside supermarkets, nurseries and immunisation clinics to tell them about the programme. A wide range of information, publicity and merchandise has also been produced to raise the profile of Sure Start programmes in local communities (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005).

The findings from the evaluations of Sure Start local programmes suggest that no one strategy is effective in engaging parents and carers and a combination of different approaches are needed to reach different groups of parents and carers (Sure Start Bridlington South, 2004; Sure Start Doncaster, 2004). In addition, the study carried out in Sure Start Bridlington South (2004) found that one strategy may be effective in promoting some activities in particular areas, but be much less effective on other occasions.

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## **2.5 Barriers to engagement**

Despite the efforts made to publicise Sure Start and engage parents and carers, a number of barriers which prevent parents from accessing local programmes have been identified. Some of the practical barriers that have been identified include a lack of information about local programmes and activities, ineffective communication of information, inappropriate timing of Sure Start activities, inflexible service hours, lack of child care for parents with older siblings, and difficulties in obtaining transport to events among parents who want to use activities (Sure Start, Doncaster, 2004; Partners in evaluation, 2004). In addition to these practical barriers there are a number of perceived barriers which appear to prevent parents and carers from using services. These include a perception that Sure Start staff (or activities) are intimidating and a stigma associated with activities, which could be perceived as being targeted at children from deprived households. Some parents who took part in one focus group suggested that trying to engage parents using local health workers such as midwives and health visitors may discourage some from using Sure Start activities because health visitors are perceived by some people as authority figures rather than friends (Sure Start, Doncaster, 2004).

## **2.6 Hard-to-reach groups**

Most Sure Start local programmes use a variety of strategies to engage parents and carers but many service providers are aware that some families who may need help (or who are perceived to need help) do not ask for help from available services and are not reached by those services (Broadhurst, 2003). The national evaluation of Sure Start has identified a number of groups that are hard-to-reach, and with whom more purposive efforts of engagement may be required (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Implementation Team, 2005). Although the prevalence of these groups will vary depending on the population profile in each area, they include male carers, parents with drug or alcohol problems, families experiencing domestic violence, children of travellers, children with special needs, asylum seekers, teenage mothers and people from black and minority ethnic communities.

One of the difficulties associated with reaching families who are defined as hard-to-reach is that there is often a lack of good quality information about these groups (Partners in evaluation, 2004). Some local programmes may also be unaware or unable to effectively convey information to these families, or lack the skills required to communicate in ways that are culturally sensitive to the needs of different groups (Department of Health, 2002).

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A study carried out by the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) examined how particular hard-to-reach groups were defined and targeted by On Track, an intervention designed to reduce crime. The study found that although people were aware of the need to target hard-to-reach groups, direct consultation occurred in less than a quarter of intervention studies. In addition, the same people were repeatedly targeted in consultation exercises and asked to speak on behalf of a number of hard-to-reach groups (Doherty, Stott & Kinder, 2004).

There is some debate about the appropriate amount of time and resources to invest in trying to engage hard-to-reach groups. Some commentators argue that if too much time and effort is invested in trying to reach these groups it can serve to stigmatise initiatives even further. Others argue that over targeting particular groups may lead to other individuals becoming reluctant to participate (Partners in evaluation, 2004).

The Health Development Agency (HDA) argues that focussing too much attention on the most socially excluded groups undermines the impact of some programmes. It states that focussing on a relatively small number of hard-to-reach families will have little impact on improving the overall situation (Partners in evaluation, 2004). Other agencies that work with individuals who are socially excluded argue that people who are defined as hard-to-reach are not a homogenous group, but include individuals with many different needs and requirements (Department of Health, 2002). The Department of Health urges agencies to think creatively about using different settings to target groups that may be hard-to-reach using conventional techniques, and suggests that using mosques, day centres, mobile clinics and theatre groups may be an effective way of reaching some groups.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

It is apparent that there are many strategies that have been employed by Sure Start local programmes to inform eligible families about the services available to them and to attempt to engage with them. In addition it is evident that different strategies will have more or less success in different locations and with different groups. Therefore, an exploration of how Sure Start New Steps has been promoted and publicised to parents and carers and reflection on how successful these strategies have been could potentially be useful in informing future publicity and marketing strategies.



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## **Chapter 3**

### **Study design and methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This was a small scale exploratory study designed to explore how Sure Start New Steps is promoted and publicised to parents and carers, in order to inform future marketing strategies. The study used qualitative research techniques which are particularly useful when a researcher wishes to describe a service or record the different perceptions people may have about an issue or process (Kumar, 1999), and interviews were utilised as the data collection method. Interviews allow a degree of flexibility and adaptation: in this study, this was necessary to explore how people were informed about services, the ways in which the services were presented and how subtle variations in this might influence perceptions and uptake of a service. The interviews also explored real or perceived barriers to using services.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

Information was collected from the Sure Start New Steps Programme Manager, two different groups of health professionals (midwives and health visitors), representatives from organisations where there was a service level agreement with Sure Start New Steps (partner agencies), and parents and carers. The interviews took place between November 2005 and January 2006. Whilst the majority were conducted face-to-face at a convenient location for the interviewees, interviews with parents who were registered with Sure Start New Steps but who did not use activities, and interviews with representatives from organisations where there was a service level agreement with Sure Start New Steps, were conducted on the telephone.

The researcher took notes during the interviews: these notes were transcribed and a thematic analysis of the interviews was undertaken. Quotations are used throughout this report to illustrate participants' views and these are anonymised with a participant number.

##### **3.2.1 Interviews with the Programme Manager and health professionals**

During the first stage of the research, an interview was conducted with the Sure Start New Steps Programme Manager in order to identify how she expected Sure Start to be promoted by partner organisations and health professionals. The information

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generated from this interview informed the interview schedules which were developed for use with all other participants in the research. Representatives from the two professional groups responsible for promoting the service to eligible parents and carers, health visitors and midwives, were the first to be interviewed.

Purposive sampling, a deliberately non-random method of sampling that seeks to select people who have knowledge of the subject valuable to the research (Bowling, 2002), was used to identify the health visitors and midwives for interview. The Sure Start New Steps Programme Manager provided a list of health visitors who worked in the area covered by Sure Start New Steps. The researcher telephoned health visitors, explained the study to them and after checking that they did work in the relevant geographical area invited them to participate in the research. Two health visitors agreed to do so. The midwives were identified with the help of the Sure Start midwife who explained the purpose of the study to a group meeting of local midwives and asked whether anybody would be prepared to take part in an interview. Two of the midwives agreed to take part.

An interview schedule was developed which included questions about the following:

- knowledge of the Sure Start New Steps programme of activities;
- verbal and written information given to parents and carers about Sure Start;
- when information about Sure Start New Steps is presented;
- consistency in the introduction and promotion of Sure Start New Steps;
- how interviewees think that the programme should be introduced and publicised.

The interview schedule can be found in Appendix 1.

### **3.2.2 Interviews with partner agencies**

Interviews were conducted with a selection of representatives who worked in agencies where a service level agreement between the organisation and Sure Start New Steps included a responsibility to promote Sure Start New Steps. The Programme Manager provided names and contact details of the relevant people to interview. The purpose of these interviews was to explore the ways in which the organisations were promoting Sure Start New Steps: a copy of the interview schedule is provided in Appendix 2.

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### **3.2.3 Interviews with parents and carers using Sure Start New Steps activities**

Interviews were conducted with parents and carers who attended services to explore their knowledge and awareness of the Sure Start New Steps programme. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify people using Sure Start New Steps activities and access to parents and carers was obtained by a CPHR researcher attending three different Sure Start New Steps activities. In order to include a cross-section of parents and carers in the sample, activities were chosen which targeted children of different age groups, which were held on different days and which were held in different locations.

A Sure Start New Steps worker explained to parents why the researcher was present and that they may be approached and asked to participate in a short interview. The interviews were conducted during the tea break or at the end of the activity. The researcher explained the purpose of the interview, that it was confidential and that people could refuse to participate if they wished. All of the parents and carers who were approached to be interviewed agreed to take part. A small number of parents and carers who attended the activities had to leave immediately afterwards and therefore could not participate in the interviews.

Interviews were conducted with parents and parents-to-be in three groups, Bumps 2 Babes, Music and Mayhem and Musical Minis group.

- Bumps 2 Babes group is held in St. Paul's Hall in Widnes. This activity is for pregnant women, their partners, and parents of babies up to one year old. It aims to provide information and facilitate the development of peer support networks. Incentives such as Indian head massage, back massage, reiki or other relaxation treatments are offered to encourage parents and parents-to-be to attend the group. Professionals such as a speech and language worker and dietician are occasionally invited to meet parents and discuss parenting issues.
- The Music and Mayhem group is held at St Ambrose Hall in Widnes. The group involves young children in songs, stories and play.
- Musical Minis is held at St. Marie's Community Centre. The aim of the group is to promote early language acquisition and development, co-ordination, numeracy skills, motor skills and social skills with children aged from two years.

The interview schedule explored the following issues:

- how parents and carers first heard about Sure Start New Steps;

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- when they registered with Sure Start and what motivated them to register;
  - how they heard about the particular activity they were using;
  - suggestions about how to publicise Sure Start New Steps services in the future.

A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix 3.

### **3.2.4 Interviews with registered parents and carers who do not use Sure Start New Steps**

Interviews were conducted with parents who had registered with Sure Start New Steps but who had not used any of their activities. A list of names and contact details of the people who had registered with New Steps between 2002 and January 2006 was provided by the Programme Manager. This contained the details of 53 families, 46 of which included a contact telephone number. Two attempts were made to contact all households where a telephone number was provided, although 16 of these numbers were no longer operational. In total, 82 attempts were made to reach households. An interview schedule was developed to explore the following issues:

- if interviewees were aware of Sure Start New Steps;
- how they had heard about Sure Start New Steps;
- how the service was introduced to them by health professionals;
- when and where they registered with Sure Start New Steps;
- what motivated them to register;
- reasons for not using Sure Start New Steps activities;
- what might motivate them to use Sure Start New Steps;
- suggestions about how to publicise Sure Start New Steps activities.

A copy of the interview schedule is provided as Appendix 4.

### **3.2.5 Interviews with parents and carers who are eligible for Sure Start New Steps but not registered**

The purpose of these interviews was to ask parents if they had heard about the Sure Start programme, whether they were registered with Sure Start New Steps, and if not, to ascertain whether they were eligible for registration.

Attempts were made to contact parents who lived within the Sure Start New Steps area but who were not registered with the programme. This was done by contacting

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two nursery schools in the New Steps area in order to obtain permission for the researcher to ask parents whether they were registered with New Steps. One nursery declined to take part in the study because some parents at the school had voiced their unhappiness about being unable to access Sure Start New Steps activities because they live outside the area and the nursery school manager thought that a discussion about eligibility may create tension among parents who use the nursery school. The second nursery school gave permission for a researcher to speak to parents who accompanied children to a toddler group and to parents collecting children who attended a nursery class based at the school.

A total of 23 parents or carers were contacted in this component of the study but further exploration of this group indicated that it included only one parent not registered with Sure Start New Steps who was eligible to do so. Of the remainder, four parents lived outside Sure Start areas, one was registered with another Sure Start local programme, 16 were registered with New Steps and one carer was unsure of the family's registration status.

### **3.3 Ethics**

The Centre for Public Health Research (CPHR) received ethical approval for the evaluation of Sure Start New Steps from South Cheshire Research Ethics Committee. Research governance approval was also granted by Halton Primary Care Trust.

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## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings from the health professionals**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted with two health visitors and two midwives working in the Sure Start New Steps area. These are the two professional groups responsible for promoting the service to eligible parents and carers.

#### **4.2 Knowledge of Sure Start New Steps**

Midwives and health visitors appeared to be knowledgeable about Sure Start New Steps and understood the criteria for registration, the incentives for registering, the kind of activities offered and the potential benefits of using groups. They appeared to be confident about communicating this information to parents and carers. Furthermore, they received regular updates from the Sure Start workers about new activities and changes to the programme, in particular from the Sure Start midwife with whom they shared an office.

#### **4.3 Determining eligibility for Sure Start**

The midwives introduce Sure Start programmes to pregnant women at an informal group session called 'Early Bird', but do not discuss eligibility for New Steps here because not all women will reach full-term in their pregnancy, or are eligible for Sure Start New Steps. Whether a pregnant woman is living within the Sure Start area is checked by the midwife on a postcode list prior to the 'booking in' visit, which usually occurs around ten weeks into the pregnancy.

The health visitors described two different approaches used to establish whether women in their care were eligible for Sure Start New Steps. One health visitor was based in a general practice where a clerical officer prepared a file for each newly born child. During this process, the family address would be compared to postcode lists of all local Sure Start programmes to ascertain whether the family lived within a Sure Start area. A colour coded file would be prepared for parents which identifies which local programme they are eligible to join, and reminds health visitors to discuss Sure Start with parents at their first appointment.

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The other health visitor, based at a health centre, was responsible for establishing whether the families she visits were eligible for Sure Start New Steps. This was done by checking the address against a list of street names and postcodes provided by Sure Start New Steps.

Both midwives and health visitors appeared confident that they understood who was eligible and could apply the criteria. A midwife who previously worked in another area explained that it was easier for them to register women in her present location as almost all women were eligible, whereas elsewhere they were required to check this first.

#### **4.4 Introducing Sure Start to parents and carers**

The midwives and health visitors described introducing Sure Start as a government programme for young children, saying the key points that they tried to convey were that it is a geographically targeted programme, which offers free services which people must register to access. They provide examples of a selection of Sure Start activities to give parents a flavour of what is available, including the Pampering Group and Baby Massage Group. One midwife said she would mention a broader range of activities including the Dads Group and Cook and Taste Sessions. She also mentioned some of the benefits of attending Sure Start activities in terms of being able to go on outings organised by Sure Start, obtain safety equipment at discounted prices, obtain help with childcare and support with employment opportunities. Only one of the midwives mentioned that she would introduce the programme as being targeted at people living in deprived areas.

Sure Start is first mentioned by the midwives at the Early Bird session. When the midwives receive notification of a pregnancy from the local GP they write to women inviting them to attend an Early Bird session, an informal group that women can attend with their partner, mother or friend. The purpose is to provide information about how to maintain a healthy pregnancy with advice about diet, exercise, smoking and drinking alcohol. Women are also given information about the care they will receive, the ante-natal tests available and the circumstances in which these are offered. Most women attend Early Bird sessions between six and eight weeks into their pregnancy.

A pregnant woman's next meeting with the midwife is usually at the 'booking-in' visit, but the midwives explained that there is a great deal of information to convey at this

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appointment and their priority was to explain about ante-natal tests. The midwives passed on the Sure Start pack at this visit and briefly introduced its contents, mentioning incentives available, activities on offer and how to register. The midwives did give the impression that their goal was to encourage women to register: one said she would encourage women to register '*then and there*' (midwife 2), offering to deliver the completed registration form to Sure Start to avoid it being forgotten or overlooked. Both midwives said that they would offer to complete the forms with a woman if they suspected that a person had low literacy levels and ask women on subsequent appointments whether they had registered with Sure Start. However, after registration was completed, both midwives were unlikely to enquire about whether women had used any Sure Start activities.

The health visitors usually mention Sure Start New Steps to parents at the birth visit, which takes place when the baby is between 10 and 14 days old. Birth visits, however, have a wide remit: they are used to introduce the health visitor, explain their role and describe what kind of support they can provide and how to contact them. The health visitor will discuss the birth with the woman and any resulting issues, as well as any practical problems such as those related to housing or benefits, referring the family to agencies that can provide further advice if appropriate. Also at this visit, a 'red book' health record is created to record the baby's growth, developmental milestones and immunisation record.

The health visitors stated that at this stage, most of the women they visit are already aware of Sure Start New Steps, having been told about it by the midwife responsible for their ante-natal care. The health visitors used their discretion about how much information to provide about Sure Start New Steps at the birth visit. They felt that some women could be overloaded with information at a time when they were exhausted and struggling to adjust to life with a new baby. If this was the case, the health visitor explained how to register with the local programme and left the pack for the parent to read later. Health visitors said they would pursue the issue of Sure Start at subsequent meetings: they felt that they had many different opportunities to discuss Sure Start such as when parents bring babies to be weighed or immunised. Health visitors appear to spend more time than midwives discussing whether women have had an opportunity to look through the Sure Start pack, and trying to establish what activities appeal to women. They would use their discretion about directing women to particular groups. One explained that if the women appeared very isolated she may recommend the Pampering Group, or if someone did not have much



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experience or lacked confidence in their parenting knowledge she may recommend a Parenting Group. Health visitors said that if a woman expresses an interest in Sure Start but appears apprehensive about using activities they would ask a Sure Start representative to visit her at home, offer to accompany them to activities or suggest that she is accompanied by a friend. Five of the women interviewed as part of this study said that this is how they were informed about Sure Start New Steps. Neither of the midwives mentioned using a Sure Start worker to encourage a woman to register. Midwives appeared to be more focussed on supporting women to register and they said that after this is done, no further discussion about Sure Start New Steps would take place.

Neither midwives or health visitors said they would mention Sure Start to women living outside Sure Start areas, although the health visitors said that if, during the course of their work with an individual, they decided a woman needed the support, they would refer her to the local Sure Start programme anyway.

#### **4.5 Perceptions of why families may not use Sure Start New Steps**

The midwives and health visitors who were interviewed had not encountered any negative reactions from women when they had introduced them to Sure Start programmes. One midwife said that some women, aware that Sure Start was targeted on disadvantaged areas, were surprised to find out that they lived in an area which was regarded as deprived.

The health visitors and midwives were asked about parents' reactions to Sure Start and the reasons for non-involvement given by those families who did not attend activities. One midwife argued that some people simply do not go to Sure Start activities because they are not interested and some made comments such as '*it's not really my thing*' or '*I've got friends*' or '*I've got my Mum.*' (midwife 2). Some women may be disinterested in activities because they do not perceive them to be of value for themselves or their children. One health visitor said that this may explain the success of the Pampering Group where there is a tangible benefit, in terms of a massage or beauty treatment, to be gained from attending the group. There was a perception that some women lacked the confidence to attend group activities, and that others just do not like such activities: an instant reaction to Sure Start from some parents was '*I don't do groups.*' (health visitor 1). One health visitor thought that less confidence may be required to attend a Pampering Group, which involves less

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interaction with other women than some of the other activities offered by Sure Start New Steps.

It was argued that some women do not attend Sure Start New Steps activities as a result of practicalities. One health visitor argued that travelling could be difficult for women with more than one young child, particularly if they do not have their own transport. This is demonstrated by the use of one Sure Start New Steps worker who accompanies a woman with three young children to activities by pushing one of the prams.

One health visitor pointed out that the geography of the area did not make activities particularly accessible for some women. Most of the activities are not particularly near to the hub of the town centre, or the supermarkets that people use. One health visitor felt that for people living on the West Bank and without their own transport, getting to the groups may be difficult and dangerous because it involves a one mile journey and crossing a five lane highway.

One midwife and both health visitors felt that women who were planning to return to work may be less inclined to attend Sure Start activities as they may prefer to spend the time alone with the baby or they may perceive there to be no value in attending for a short time.

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## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings from partner agencies**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

Sure Start New Steps has service level agreements with a number of local organisations to support their work. In some cases, Sure Start New Steps provide financial support for components of a service provided by a local organisation whilst in others, there is an agreement to employ a worker within the organisation to support the work of Sure Start.

Four interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations which have a service level agreement between themselves and Sure Start New Steps, or between the organisation and a number of local Sure Start programmes (including New Steps): these were Library Services, Citizens Advice Bureau, the Speech and Language Therapy Service and an organisation called Community Parents. The aim of these interviews was to ascertain how the different agencies promote the work of Sure Start New Steps.

#### **5.2 Introducing and promoting Sure Start New Steps**

It was clear that many of the families who contact these partner organisations are already aware of Sure Start, having been introduced to it by other service providers. The representative from the Speech and Language Therapy Service explained that many referrals to their organisation come via Sure Start local programmes, including New Steps.

Two of the partner agencies had a dedicated worker who was responsible for introducing people to Sure Start, whilst in others, all staff are aware of the programme so that whoever responded to an enquiry could introduce people to Sure Start. Three interviewees said that people who approached them for assistance were asked if they were aware of Sure Start and their details checked to establish if they lived within a Sure Start area whilst the Citizens Advice Bureau had a facility on their website for people to enter their postcode to establish if they lived within a Sure Start area and which local programme they were eligible to join. One organisation conducts outreach work with local communities which provide other opportunities to promote the work of Sure Start New Steps.

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The main way in which the work of Sure Start New Steps is promoted by partner agencies is through their publicity, marketing and promotional material, which carries the Sure Start logo. Some organisations have designed their own material and added the Sure Start logo, whereas others, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau have developed a series of Sure Start posters. Publicity may be distributed to parents of young children directly or through organisations working with parents. It may also be available at office bases.

Three of the partner agencies explained that they distribute the Sure Start information pack and a member of staff would go through it with eligible families, explaining how to complete the registration form and describing the activities that are available. Library Services explained that they do not promote the work of Sure Start New Steps in this way as library staff are uncomfortable asking for personal details such as address and postcodes, but said that the work of Sure Start New Steps is promoted through the library activities and given to anyone who requests information about the programme.

A representative from the Citizens Advice Bureau said that they have a good relationship with the local press and have managed to secure some coverage of local achievements and Sure Start and Citizens Advice Bureau events in 'The World' and 'Weekly News'.

One interviewee explained that their organisation actively promotes the work of Sure Start New Steps by introducing and explaining the programme to other professionals with whom they come into contact. They argued that the high turnover in the area of some professional groups, such as social workers, meant that a lot of their work involves promoting Sure Start to staff that have recently joined local teams. This involved both explaining the rationale behind Sure Start and informing people about activities or events that are being organised.

### **5.3 Views of Sure Start New Steps publicity**

Representatives from partner organisations spoke highly about the Sure Start New Steps publicity material and it was described by interviewees as clear, colourful, attractive, professional and easy to understand. One person thought it was visually appealing to parents and children and another said that they were aware that a great deal of care and attention had been spent on developing appropriate information and materials, which was piloted on a group of parents before wider distribution.

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A number of suggestions were made about how Sure Start New Steps could raise their profile and encourage more parents to take part in their activities. Representatives from three organisations suggested that New Steps could distribute their promotional material at primary schools and centres where people register the birth of their child. One person recommended that Sure Start develop closer links with the voluntary sector through umbrella organisations that work in Halton, including Halton Voluntary Action and Halton Together. Two interviewees thought that Sure Start New Steps could make a more concerted effort at targeting the local media by providing material on a regular basis.

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## Chapter 6

### Findings from parents and carers

#### 6.1 Introduction

During the course of the research, contact was established with families who fell into four groups:

- sixteen registered families attending three different Sure Start New Steps activities;
- six families who attended activities but were not registered because they lived outside the Sure Start area;
- one family who was eligible and not registered but who had attended activities;
- eighteen parents and carers who were registered with Sure Start New Steps but who did not use activities. One of these was a grandparent caring for a child registered with Sure Start New Steps and another was a foster parent who had looked after children registered with Sure Start New Steps in the past. Although the interviewees were registered as having not used Sure Start New Steps activities, two said they had used activities provided by other local programmes.

Where direct quotations from individual interviewees are used, it is indicated whether the individual participant was a user or a non-user of Sure Start New Steps services.

#### 6.2 How parents heard about Sure Start New Steps

The parents and carers who took part in the research had first heard about Sure Start from a wide range of sources including health visitors, midwives, other health workers, Sure Start workers, staff in other agencies, informal sources such as friends and family members and through written promotional material. None of those who made enquiries about Sure Start reported experiencing any difficulties in obtaining information about the programme.

Most of the interviewees thought that they had heard about Sure Start New Steps shortly after the birth of their baby, although one interviewee said that she was told about the programme much later at the baby's 40 month check with the health visitor, who said '*you should join, you should register with Sure Start.*' (non-user, interview 2).

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### 6.2.1 Health professionals

The majority of interviewees were told about Sure Start by a health professional, primarily a midwife or health visitor. Some respondents were already familiar with the name Sure Start, and were aware that it was a programme which involved young children, but did not know what kind of activities it offered, or the name of the local programme. Only two interviewees had detailed knowledge of the programme before it was mentioned by health professionals and they had both been employed within a Sure Start programme.

Midwives and health visitors were also the main source of information about this particular programme, Sure Start New Steps. Many interviewees did not recollect details of conversations about Sure Start New Steps with midwives before the birth: there was higher recall of conversations with health visitors with a number referring to conversations about the programme which took place during home visits or when they took their babies to be weighed or immunised. One interviewee said Sure Start New Steps was mentioned by someone who *'wasn't the health visitor but it was her assistant, she looked a bit awkward talking about it.'* (non-user, interview 5).

Most interviewees said that Sure Start New Steps had been mentioned by health professionals on more than one occasion and by different health workers. Respondents stated that it was helpful to be reminded about Sure Start because it could be difficult to absorb a lot of information, particularly shortly after the birth of their first child. One said *'when you've got a new baby it's hard to think straight, it's good to be reminded of what's available.'* (user, interview 9).

Sure Start New Steps was not mentioned by a midwife or health visitor to a small number of mothers. Some of these respondents, however, had moved since having their baby and may have previously been living outside the area. One interviewee was confident that she had not been told about Sure Start when she was pregnant or shortly after the birth of her first child two years ago, but she added that Sure Start New Steps had been mentioned on a number of occasions by health professionals who she had consulted during her second pregnancy. It is possible that health professionals are now more systematic about how the programme is introduced to women than during the earlier years of the programme.

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### **6.2.2 Sure Start worker**

In addition to being told about Sure Start by a health professional, five interviewees recalled a home visit from a Sure Start worker shortly after the birth of their baby. Another interviewee was living in a women's refuge when she was visited by a Sure Start worker and invited to register.

### **6.2.3 Other agencies**

One respondent was told about Sure Start New Steps by an employee at the Job Centre, who gave her information about the kind of activities available and arranged for a Sure Start worker to visit her at home and give her more details about the activities and how to register. One grandparent, whose daughter lived in the Sure Start New Steps area but had returned to full-time work, said she contacted the library to enquire about local groups and activities for young children.

### **6.2.4 Informal sources**

A smaller number of interviewees heard about the programme from family members or friends who had used Sure Start New Steps activities. Although there were relatively few interviewees who had first heard about Sure Start New Steps by word of mouth, those who did said that this had motivated them to register and use activities because it was recommended to them. Some respondents were more comfortable attending activities if they knew someone who used them. Two grandparents heard about Sure Start from their daughters who were living in the New Steps area and had registered with the programme, but were unable to attend activities because they were employed during the day.

### **6.2.5 Leaflets and posters**

One further source of information about Sure Start was promotional material. This had been seen in the clinic where respondents had received ante-natal care or in venues where parenting classes were held: interviewees subsequently asked the midwives about the programme. Two interviewees had heard about Sure Start New Steps from advertising posters in the library, or had visited the library when Sure Start New Steps activities were being held and made enquiries about it.



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### **6.3 Promotion and publicity**

Interviewees were asked to go into some detail about the way in which Sure Start New Steps was promoted to them and about their perceptions of the publicity material produced for the programme.

#### **6.3.1 Promotion of Sure Start**

Very few of the interviewees could recall details of how Sure Start was presented to them at the Early Bird session or how New Steps was introduced by either midwives or health visitors. Some remembered it being introduced as a government programme and most recalled being given some examples of the kinds of activities on offer. One remembered the midwife telling her *'that there is this new programme for women with young children, where they do different kinds of activities and outings for mothers and children.'* (non-user, interview 11).

Some of the midwives appear to have described, in more detail, activities they considered relevant to pregnant women. Some interviewees had been told about the Bumps 2 Babes Group and the benefits of attending such a group whilst two interviewees said that their midwives had mentioned that through membership of Sure Start New Steps they would be entitled to obtain household safety equipment at a discounted price. Others said that their midwives had just asked if they were registered and after this was established the discussion ended.

Two of the interviewees were very positive about a home visit from a Sure Start worker who presented a lot of information about the programme and explained the different activities available. One person said that the Sure Start representative who visited her at home made her feel welcome to use the activities and groups. Another interviewee could not remember how the programme was presented, and did not remember if details of the activities were given, but said that she had a friend who used Sure Start and had spoken to her about activities.

Interviewees gave the impression that the health professionals who promoted the service were well informed about Sure Start New Steps and had been able to answer questions about the programme and the activities available. Only one interviewee made comments indicating that insufficient information was provided, saying that *'the midwife didn't give me details about the programme she just gave me a Sure Start pack with the information inside.'* (non-user, interview 13).

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### 6.3.2 Publicity material

Interviewees were asked for their views about the information and publicity material produced by Sure Start New Steps. All but one of the respondents said they regularly received information in the post about Sure Start New Steps activities, with one interviewee commenting that *'they keep you well informed about what's going on'* (non-user, interview 4). Several others referred to the fact that there were lots of posters and leaflets about Sure Start New Steps at local venues.

Four interviewees commented on how attractive and inviting publicity material was. One said *'I think the newsletter's brilliant.'* (non-user, interview 11). Others said that they found the information easy to read, that it seemed to be suitable for the audience and did not provide too much information: one person felt that the promotional material was *'more interesting than reading a letter or something like that, it doesn't give you too much information and it's basic and simple.'* (non-user, interview 14).

Some of the interviewees who did not attend activities said that nevertheless they had found some of the material useful. One said that she had found *'the information about weaning and feeding really helpful'* (non-user, interview 10). One interviewee who was a playgroup leader and foster parent explained the importance of providing regular information to parents. She said she took the newsletter to the playgroup and reminded parents about what activities were available: she argued that busy mothers do not always have time to read the letters when they arrive, information can be mislaid or taken by older children so parents may not be aware of activities.

When asked if they had any suggestions about how to publicise Sure Start New Steps in the future, most people said that they thought the activities were well publicised in the local community. A small number, however, felt that they were probably more aware of the publicity because they attended Sure Start New Steps activities.

The most popular suggestions about where to publicise the programme were local clinics, GP surgeries and the local media. Other suggestions included local shops, post offices and schools where parents may not be aware of New Steps because it did not exist when their older children were born. One interviewee suggested sending flyers to all the houses in the Sure Start area, although she added that this would not encourage her to use the services because she is too shy to attend groups.

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## **6.4 Registering with Sure Start New Steps**

The parents and carers were asked to recall when they had registered with Sure Start New Steps and why they had chosen to do so. None of the interviewees reported any difficulties with registering although some mentioned that they were given assistance by health professionals.

### **6.4.1 When parents registered**

A small minority of interviewees registered before the birth of their baby when they were told about the programme during their ante-natal care. Those who registered during pregnancy were very knowledgeable about Sure Start and were aware of the activities available for pregnant women.

Practical reasons, such as working until shortly before the birth of their baby, were given as reasons for waiting until after the birth to register. Two families registered shortly after the birth, but most waited until their baby was a few months old before registering. Reasons given for delaying registration suggest that mothers often spent the first few months after the birth adjusting to having a baby. Comments referred to the fact that they did not feel prepared to use activities immediately after the birth because they were preoccupied or were adjusting to looking after their baby and had no interest in attending groups. Some mothers said that they did not have the confidence to leave the house with their new babies whilst others said that none of the activities had appealed to them when the baby was very small.

There was also a perception that the activities offered were not very useful to small babies: a number of interviewees said that it was only when their babies were a few months old and were responding to people and their surroundings that they perceived there to be any value in attending activities. Others made comments suggesting that they did not see the value in attending groups until their babies were more mobile or starting to interact with other children.

One parent did not register after the birth of her first child because she planned to return to work full-time shortly after the birth, and only registered after her second child was born as she was working part-time and had time to attend activities.

### **6.4.2 Reasons for registering**

The interviewer asked parents and carers why they had registered with Sure Start New Steps. Most interviewees said they registered because they thought that their

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children would benefit from using the activities available: some suggested that this was particularly important when children become mobile, and started to respond to others - there was a perception that it was important for young children to socialise with others. One interviewee said that she had registered because she wanted to use activities: she was told that Sure Start offers trips, advice and classes and she *'wanted to do the right thing by her child.'* (non-user, interview 3). Two mothers were motivated to register by friends who had used activities and recommended them.

One interviewee felt that there were a lot of local activities for toddler age children, but fewer for mothers with young babies: she wanted something specifically designed for women with small babies and realised Sure Start could offer this. Some interviewees registered with Sure Start New Steps because they were interested in attending a particular activity such as Baby Massage or the Pampering Group or obtaining safety equipment at discounted prices. Another respondent had been keen to take advantage of the free books that were provided from Book Start in collaboration with Sure Start New Steps. The availability of training opportunities for adults had been a motivation for two of the parents interviewed.

Some respondents registered with Sure Start because they wanted an opportunity to meet with other mothers. Two mums who had older children reported that after the birth of their first child they felt isolated and wanted to avoid a similar experience after the birth of their second child. One woman said she was bored of being at home with a small baby and wanted to meet people and another said *'I came because I wanted to get out of the house.'* (user, interview 7). Two mothers, who had a long gap between children, said that they were nervous that they may have forgotten how to look after children and wanted to meet other women in a similar situation.

Two interviewees said that they registered in order to find out more about Sure Start New Steps, although they did not plan to use activities at that time. They wanted to ensure that they received information about activities that may be of interest to them in the future. Only one person suggested that she would not have registered had it not been for the persistence of Sure Start staff. She said that *'I wasn't particularly bothered, but they kept coming round.'* (non-user, interview 11).

## **6.5 Reasons for not using Sure Start New Steps**

Respondents were asked about the things that stopped them from attending Sure Start New Steps activities.

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### **6.5.1 Impact of work**

Parents who were employed or studying felt they were unable to use Sure Start services as a result of restrictions on their time and the nature of their childcare arrangements.

A number of interviewees explained that since returning to work they had very little time to spend with their children and the time they did have they chose to use in other ways. One person said that she spent so little time with her child that she would not choose to spend the little time they have in the company of people she did not know.

Some children attended a nursery and parents were reluctant to disrupt their routine by removing them to attend Sure Start activities: one interviewee, who was a full-time university student and whose twins attended a nursery, said she would be unlikely to consider using Sure Start New Steps activities even during holidays because she did not want to upset their routine. For the same reason, she would not consider attending evening events. One parent would not consider attending events because she had to give advance notice to the nursery or she would be charged for the day, and she stated that her daughter would be disappointed about not attending her usual nursery.

One interviewee said that since returning to work her mother-in-law was looking after her child, and although she thought her child would enjoy the activities it was unlikely to appeal to her mother-in-law.

Two interviewees stopped using Sure Start New Steps activities because they were childminders and some of the children in their care were not registered. They were told that other parents had complained about one person taking too many places in the group.

### **6.5.2 Timing of activities**

The timing of activities was inconvenient for a small number of interviewees. One person said she was busy in the morning when most activities took place, and morning activities clashed with other nursery classes. One interviewee said that she and her partner work nights and are not available during the day when Sure Start activities operate.

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Three of the interviewees said that they may consider weekend or evening activities but that it would depend upon the activity, although parents who worked said that they tended to be busy at weekends with household activities.

### **6.5.3 Confidence and contacts**

An obstacle for some parents was the thought of going to an activity where they may not know anyone or they felt they might be uncomfortable. A number of respondents said they were shy and reserved, or uncomfortable in group situations. One mother said that she would only consider using activities if she knew other people in the group. Although one interviewee said that she was too shy to attend groups and did not want to commit herself to a regular activity, she had taken part in one-off events organised by New Steps, when she had been accompanied by a friend: she saw this as being less intimidating than group activities.

### **6.5.4 Perception of activities**

Although no-one said that they did not use Sure Start New Steps because of any negative perceptions they had about the programme, one person argued that the activities did not appeal to her because *'I'm not that sort of person, I'm not into things like that, I'm not mumsy and don't fancy getting together with groups of other mothers.'* (non-user, interview 5). She had not attended any similar activities with her older children and she thought that these kinds of activities may foster competition between women. She also felt that she was *'alright at home on my own.'* (non-user, interview 5), adding that she had a lot of toys and activities at home which were similar to those used in groups. Another respondent who did not attend Sure Start New Steps activities said that she did not think she was in need of groups, saying she had the support of friends and family and did not feel isolated.

### **6.5.5 Practical considerations**

The practicalities of getting to Sure Start activities deterred one parent. She did not drive and argued that it would be difficult to get to groups on public transport: it would involve taking two buses and cost £1.20. She felt it would be *'a bit of a hassle to attend.'* (non-user, interviewee 5) and, as she has two older children, she would also have to consider whether this would clash with taking or collecting her children from school. Two interviewees with older children argued that it was difficult to attend Sure Start activities because it would involve organising child care for older children.

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## **Chapter 7**

### **Discussion**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter draws upon results from interviews with service providers, parents and carers to review how Sure Start New Steps is being introduced and promoted to the eligible population and consider ways in which this may be improved.

#### **7.2 Awareness of Sure Start New Steps among parents and carers**

Awareness of Sure Start in general and the New Steps programme in particular was high among parents and carers involved in this study. There was also some indication of relatively high levels of awareness of individual New Steps activities among parents in the local community. Several interviewees had heard about Sure Start New Steps prior to being introduced to the programme by health professionals, hearing about it by word-of-mouth. Six of the parents and carers using activities that were visited in this study were not eligible for registration with Sure Start New Steps and were therefore unlikely to have been told about the programme by health professionals and more likely to have heard by word-of-mouth. Other parents and carers reported having actively sought information about Sure Start New Steps and none mentioned experiencing any difficulties in obtaining this information.

Although the researcher did not encounter any parents of young children who were not aware of Sure Start New Steps, some grandparents had lower levels of awareness, and some were only introduced to it after actively seeking activities for young children. Sure Start New Steps may want to consider ways in which it can raise awareness of Sure Start New Steps among grandparents caring for young children, develop activities that may appeal to this group and promote the service in ways that encourage older carers to attend.

#### **7.3 Promotion of Sure Start New Steps by health professionals**

Health professionals and representatives from organisations with a service level agreement to promote Sure Start New Steps were aware of their responsibility to promote the service. Interviews with health professionals revealed that both midwives and health visitors had a clear and systematic approach to identifying whether parents were eligible for Sure Start New Steps, and to introducing it into discussions with parents. This was corroborated by comments made by parents in this study who

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said that they were informed about the programme by midwives or health professionals, many of whom said that they were told about Sure Start New Steps on more than one occasion and by more than one health professional.

Health professionals appeared to have sufficient knowledge of Sure Start New Steps to promote it effectively. They were aware of the criteria for eligibility and had sufficient knowledge of the various activities to promote them to parents and carers. Health professionals described close links between their organisations and individuals in Sure Start New Steps, and were confident that information about the programme was accurate and current. Furthermore, they were confident in their ability to communicate information effectively to parents and carers.

Parents and carers appeared to be satisfied with the way in which the programme was introduced to them, and in the amount and content of information provided. Although several interviewees had low recall of the details of how Sure Start New Steps was introduced, many remember it being described as a government programme, and being given examples of a variety of different activities, the incentives available for people who register and some of the benefits associated with using activities. The information appears to have been communicated in ways that avoided stigmatising Sure Start New Steps as a programme targeting people living in disadvantaged areas.

Health professionals reported that they actively encouraged parents and carers to register with Sure Start New Steps. This was confirmed by comments made by parents, many of whom remember being asked about registration on more than one occasion whether they had registered and being offered support to do so.

Discussions with health professionals and parents implied that the approach used by health visitors and midwives may have been slightly different. Health visitors appeared more likely to explore with parents what parenting concerns they had and what types of activities appealed to them in order to identify suitable New Steps activities, and take a more holistic approach to promoting the programme. Health visitors also appeared to be sensitive to the concerns of some parents about attending groups, taking such action as inviting a Sure Start worker to visit parents who required more support to use activities. In contrast, midwives seemed to be more likely to focus on registration and after this was complete were unlikely to discuss Sure Start New Steps again.



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There are a number of factors that might explain these differences in the recall of how the programme was introduced among parents and the different approach used by health professionals. Recall of conversations with midwives may be lower than with health visitors because more time had elapsed since meetings took place. Midwives also reported having to communicate a considerable amount of information about ante-natal tests and screening during early appointments, which may explain why they do not convey information about Sure Start New Steps as comprehensively as health visitors. Some women also mentioned that during their ante-natal care there was a tendency to focus on the birth rather than activities they might participate in with their babies. If the focus of their attention was on the birth it may be difficult to absorb information about activities that are perceived to be for babies and older children. Sure Start New Steps may want to consider discussing with midwives whether there may be a more suitable appointment, after the initial tests are complete, when they may have more time and women may be more reassured about the progress of their pregnancy and more receptive to information about Sure Start New Steps, particularly if the groups which are actively promoted are those designed for pregnant women.

#### **7.4 Registration with Sure Start New Steps**

The majority of interviewees registered with Sure Start New Steps after the birth of their baby. The minority of those who registered earlier appeared to be very knowledgeable about the programme and the support available for pregnant women. There are a number of different explanations for this, including the fact that some women worked until just before the birth of their baby and did not have time to attend activities until they were on maternity leave. Sure Start New Steps may want to review whether it may be worthwhile to offer more evening or weekend activities for pregnant women. However, one disadvantage of these groups may be that women with new babies are less likely to attend so the mutual sharing of information and support among pregnant women and mothers would be lost.

Very few interviewees registered with Sure Start New Steps during their pregnancy and it is possible that women are not as receptive to information about Sure Start until they consider it appropriate to register and use activities. There appeared to be a perception among some women that activities like Sure Start were more suitable for young children when they become mobile and start to interact with other children and Sure Start New Steps may want to consider promoting aspects of the service which are for pregnant women or very young babies.

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## **7.5 Families who did not use Sure Start New Steps**

The families who did not attend activities had experienced a similar introduction to Sure Start and the registration process as those that did attend: the findings from the research did not suggest that this part of the process made a difference to whether families were involved with the programme.

Families who did not attend Sure Start New Steps activities gave reasons for their non-involvement which can be categorised as a mixture of barriers, restrictions and individual choices. Barriers to attendance at activities included a lack of confidence and not knowing other people who attended, the times that activities were held, a lack of transport and the need to accommodate older siblings. The restrictions on parents who were working or studying concerned the negative effect that attending Sure Start activities might have on their childcare arrangements, their child's routine and on the limited time they already had to spend with their young children. Other parents had chosen not to attend Sure Start activities because they did not appeal to them or they preferred to turn to family and friends if they needed support.

Some of the reasons for non-involvement presented in this research could be addressed by Sure Start New Steps in order to encourage more families to attend: the parents who identified barriers to their accessing services may be the priority group as they did not refer to specific restrictions on their involvement or a reason for choosing not to attend. These findings highlight the fact that not all families are 'hard-to-reach' for the same reason and not all families who do not use services are 'hard-to-reach'.

## **7.6 Publicity and information**

The publicity material produced by Sure Start New Steps was described as clear and attractive by both partner agencies and parents and carers. A number of suggestions were made about how the programme could extend their promotional work but the research did not find that parents who did not use Sure Start New Steps were uninformed about the programme in general. These parents recalled receiving regular information through the post and some had seen advertising at local venues. If this publicity could make a difference to them it would need to convey something different that the parent felt that they could gain from attending activities that would encourage them to try to overcome the restrictions they faced or to change their perception about the value of the programme to them and their children.

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## 7.7 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore how Sure Start New Steps is promoted and publicised to parents and carers, in order to inform future marketing strategies. It would seem that Sure Start New Steps is promoted largely successfully to the community, and that some of the people who do not access services do not do so because they have decided that they are not appropriate for them. However, there are some issues that the Sure Start New Steps programme may like to consider when planning future marketing strategies.

- The experience of midwives, health visitors and parents suggests that a lot of information has to be taken in at initial contacts between health professionals and prospective parents and this may not be the best time to go into detail about Sure Start services.
- Possibly linked to the previous point, midwives do not seem to follow up on promoting Sure Start activities: there is a big drive to register women and then they do not appear to speak about Sure Start again.
- Where home visits from Sure Start workers take place they are very positively received, so there may be capacity for early referral from midwives and health visitors to at least some families.
- Registration of families with Sure Start New Steps appears to be relatively late - usually when the child is a few weeks or possibly months old. Thus, the effectiveness of services targeted at pregnant mothers is compromised. Attempting to register mothers earlier could be a useful priority.
- The findings of this study reflect other research which has indicated that families who do not use activities have received regular information about the programme: it is not a basic lack of information that stops people although there may be issues about its content (Ward & Thurston, 2005).
- At least one parent who had not used Sure Start New Steps services but had received promotional material such as newsletters commented that the content of the newsletter had been useful. Therefore, although not measurable, the programme may be 'reaching' more than the individuals who attend specific activities and this underlines the importance of continuing to produce informative promotional material.
- There is some suggestion that families see the benefits of Sure Start beginning when a child is older: it may be that the toddler development

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aspects of Sure Start have come across more strongly than the possible benefits for younger children and their parents.

- The situation may change with children's centres: services will not be geographically based and so may be easier to promote as they will be truly universal.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Interview schedule for health professionals**

### **Questions for health professionals:**

1. Could you start by telling me your job title and what your job involves
2. What contact do you usually have with pregnant women or people who have recently become parents?
3. Could you tell me what you know about Sure Start (probe who is it for, what does it aim to do, how does it do this) What Sure Start activities are you aware of?
4. Could you tell me what you know about who New Steps Sure Start works with?
5. Do you tell the women that you work with about Sure Start?
6. Can you describe how they would be introduced to Sure Start?
7. At what stage of your relationship would this introduction be made?
8. Would you encourage people to use Sure Start New Steps? (probe some or all mothers and who this would be? and how they would decide who to encourage to use Sure Start)
9. In what ways would you encourage women to use Sure Start?
10. Do you have any suggestions about how to improve the promotion or publicity of Sure Start?



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**Appendix 2**  
**Interview schedule for partner agencies promoting Sure Start**  
**New Steps**

**Questions for partner agencies:**

1. Please can you describe the service you provide?
2. Please describe the work that you do with Sure Start New Steps?
3. How knowledgeable are staff in your organisation about Sure Start New Steps?
4. How is the work of Sure Start New Steps promoted by this organisation?
5. What are your views on the Sure Start New Steps publicity?
6. Do you have any other suggestions about how the work of Sure Start New Steps can be promoted?

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**Appendix 3**  
**Interview schedule for parents and carers using Sure Start**  
**New Steps**

**Questions for parents using Sure Start New Steps activities:**

1. Can you remember how you first heard about Sure Start New Steps?
2. Do you remember when you registered with Sure Start?
3. When did you register with Sure Start?
4. What motivated you to register?
5. Had you heard about Sure Start before?
6. Do you remember if the midwife you saw when you were pregnant mentioned Sure Start New Steps to you?
7. Have any health professionals or representative from another organisation mentioned Sure Start to you? If so, which organisation were they from?
8. Do you remember what your first impressions were when you were told about Sure Steps?

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**Appendix 4**  
**Interview schedule for registered parents and carers not using**  
**Sure Start New Steps**

**Questions for parents who are registered but do not use  
Sure Start New Steps:**

1. Have you heard about Sure Start New Steps?
2. Can you tell me what you know about the service?
3. Can you remember when you registered with Sure Start New Steps?
4. Can you remember where you registered? And who motivated you to register?
5. Can you tell me why you registered with Sure Start New Steps?
6. What did you hope to achieve from registering?
7. Have you ever used any of the Sure Start New Steps activities?
8. Do you remember which of these they were?
9. Why haven't you used Sure Start New Steps activities?
10. Is there anything that would encourage you to use the activities, and if so, what is this?
11. Do you have any suggestions about how Sure Start New Steps activities could be publicised?