

Centre for Public Health Research

Parental participation in Sure Start Jolly Giraffe
The role and effectiveness of the Parents' Forum

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Summary

Introduction

The aim of the commissioned research project was to examine Sure Start Jolly Giraffe's model for facilitating parental participation. Commitment to, and evidence of, user involvement is now included as a central theme in the design and delivery of initiatives which impact upon individuals and their communities. An additional and increasingly prominent issue for scrutiny is the effectiveness and significance of the methods selected by service providers for promoting consultation and participation.

A key principle of the Sure Start initiative is the transparent involvement of service users in all aspects of programme decision making. A further requirement of local programmes is to provide evidence of parental consultation and participation. Sure Start guidance places significant emphasis on the need for local programmes to provide relevant and appropriate services to match the needs of their communities. In acknowledging Jolly Giraffe's parents' group, the Parents' Forum, as the primary arena for parental feedback in the programme, a need was identified for an in-depth examination of its role, processes and impact.

Methodology

A focus group was held with Parent Forum members and in-depth interviews were carried out with a total of six stakeholders. Participants were made up of key programme staff, Parents' Forum members and Jolly Giraffe Management Board members. Semi-structured interview schedules were used for the focus group and individual interview situations which explored the following themes:

- role and effectiveness of the Parent's Forum;
- development of Forum structure and procedures;
- parental partnership in Jolly Giraffe's decision making process;
- communication and information pathways;
- benefits of participation;
- barriers to involvement.

A brief questionnaire was also administered amongst the wider Jolly Giraffe service user population which was designed to provide information on awareness and views of the role and purpose of the Parents' Forum. A total of twelve questionnaires were completed.

Key Findings

Role and purpose of the Parents' Forum

- Parents and staff view the Parents' Forum as an effective vehicle for both consultation and communication.
- Staff and Management Board members consider parental participation in the Forum to be a major factor in protecting the sustainability of Sure Start Jolly Giraffe.
- Programme staff and Management Board members consider the Forum to be vital to the efficient running of Jolly Giraffe.
- Parent members' relationship with the Community Development Worker plays a pivotal role in securing the involvement of parents and encouraging their meaningful participation in the Forum.
- An informal, drop-in approach to attendance at Forum meetings results in a week by week fluctuation in the group profile. Thus the term Parents' Forum may be considered to represent an *arena* for participation rather than a specific *body* of individuals.

Development of Forum structure and procedures

- The views and needs of parents have led in the evolution of the Forum's structure and approach.
- The time and effort invested in developing this model has resulted in a strong sense of achievement and satisfaction among those involved in the Forum.
- The informality of meetings is a key factor in securing and maintaining attendance levels.
- Forum attendance levels have been improved and secured by the introduction of incentive 'taster sessions'.

Parental partnership in Sure Start Jolly Giraffe's decision making process

- Parents' Forum members consider their opinions and contributions to be given due value and consideration.
- The discussion and review of relevant operational and strategic issues is encouraged.
- Whilst parents are full and equal partners in the Parents' Forum, improving their ability and willingness to contribute to decision making at Management Board level is an area for review and development.

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- Parents reluctant to progress to a 'power-sharing' level of participation where responsibility for decision making is attributable.

Communication

- A high level of satisfaction amongst Forum members with regard to the methods used for processing their contributions and providing them with feedback.
- Degree of confidence in procedures is instrumental in influencing the willingness of participants to be involved in the Forum.
- An area for development is the strengthening and formalising of links between the Forum and the wider service user group.

Benefits of participation

- Increases in confidence and feelings of self-worth identified by Forum members as key outcomes from involvement in the Forum.
- Consultation with parents a positive influence on the efficient and appropriate use of resources.
- An atmosphere of mutual support and respect amongst Forum members provides a vital opportunity for support networks to develop.

Barriers to involvement

- The issue of crèche availability, although largely resolved, can play a key part in preventing parents from attending the Forum.
- Geographical spread of Jolly Giraffe catchment area means that not all venues are equally convenient for parents to attend.
- Parents' discomfort with the notions of power and responsibility perceived to accompany participation at Management Board level.

Conclusions and recommendations

In considering the success of Jolly Giraffe's approach to promoting parental involvement, the fostering and development of feelings of loyalty, satisfaction and significance among Forum members is noteworthy. The high level of regard in which the Community Development Worker is held, coupled with a relaxed, informal approach to Forum attendance and format, have emerged as prominent factors in influencing and securing participation. Despite the lack of pressure on participants to formalise their

commitment to Forum 'membership', regular Forum members display feelings of 'ownership' with regard to the Forum. Participants have a sense of pride in being involved in this level of Jolly Giraffe's decision making process.

In discussing recruitment to the Management Board, Forum members clearly felt this to be a primarily formal and daunting arena for participation. An additional barrier to recruitment has been the reluctance amongst Forum members to assume power or responsibility for decision making, particularly if contributing as an individual rather than a group. Discussion with Forum members has highlighted some areas of development for tackling the issue of facilitating involvement at Management Board level. This report contains some recommendations for addressing the issue of parental participation at Management Board level.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

The central principles for the governance of local Sure Start programmes are outlined in Sure Start Unit guidance (2002). A key principle, and fundamental to the governance process, is the transparent involvement of service users in all aspects of programme decision making from the earliest stage of programme design through to management and service delivery. Parental participation is formalised through the inclusion of parents on the management boards of local programmes. 'Guidance on Evaluating Sure Start' (2002) also highlights the role which parents, grandparents and carers must play in the monitoring and evaluation of services. A further requirement of local partnerships is to provide evidence of parent consultation and participation in identifying appropriate services to meet the needs of the local community. The localised response to this has been the setting up of parent groups, commonly referred to as 'Parents' Forums' (Sure Start Unit Guidance, 2002).

Jolly Giraffe is one of five local Sure Start programmes in Halton. It is a sixth wave programme, established in 2003 and is based at Halton Lodge Children's Centre in Runcorn. Currently there are 1,012 eligible families in the area (that is families caring for at least one child aged below four years).

Whilst Sure Start Unit guidance clearly sets out the principles of, and requirements for, parental participation, local programmes are expected to identify and implement strategies and approaches which will best secure the meaningful involvement of their particular community. The Jolly Giraffe Delivery Plan (2003) outlined objectives for securing and promoting parental involvement in the management of the programme. Along with targets set for parental representation on the Management Board, a key element of the Plan was the creation of a parents group, the Parents' Forum, as a mechanism for parental participation.

1.2 Partnership and participation

Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation' (1969) has traditionally been considered a seminal, though by no means unchallenged, piece of work in its identification of a 'hierarchy' for levels of involvement. The various stages chart 'a continuum from tokenism to power-

sharing with important implications for democracy and citizenship' (Gustafsson & Driver, 2005, p.532). Nearly forty years on, the academic and political debate continues to ruminate over what constitutes genuine partnership and involvement in decision making, placing the terms 'community', 'consultation' and 'power' under constant scrutiny and review (McLaughlin, Brown & Young, 2004; Kane & Bishop, 2002; Morrow & Malin, 2004). An increasing focus has also developed on capacity building as a determinant of meaningful participation (Attree, 2004; Van der Platt & Barrett, 2006) therein reflecting a view that to offer individuals and communities the opportunity to participate, without preparing them to do so, represents an ultimately empty gesture. Thus the concepts of partnership, empowerment and power sharing are increasingly a central theme in critical analyses of community participation (Gustafsson & Driver, 2005; Van der Platt & Barrett, 2006).

In acknowledging Sure Start as an area-based initiative aimed at children and families living in deprived communities, a particularly pertinent point in the theoretical debate would appear to be the role which social and economic circumstances play in prejudicing the ability and willingness of individuals to participate in decision making processes (Pease, 2002; Van der Platt & Barrett, 2006).

A recent study conducted for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, '*Improving delivery of mainstream services in deprived areas – the role of community involvement*' (2005) involved the identification, through the review of relevant documentation, of a broad typology of community involvement. The three categories identified were as follows.

- **Information and consultation** – driven primarily by the service providers to learn about and respond to the needs of service users, potential users and the communities in which they are located.
- **Deliberative engagement, single and cross-thematic** – providers engaging users and their communities as participating partners in deliberative consideration of service planning and delivery – either within a single policy theme (eg health) or in cross-thematic ways.
- **Community provision** – community based organisations having contracted or delegated responsibility from mainstream providers for service design, delivery and review.

(ODPM, 2005, p.4)

Having identified this typology the study examined and compared the experiences of fifteen community initiatives whose approaches to community involvement fitted in to each of these categories. The report concluded that, in providing services in deprived areas, an approach confined merely to information and consultation is insufficient; *'these approaches have to be complemented by community involvement that is more intensive, deliberative and engaging if the needs of residents are to be understood and met'* (ODPM, 2005, p.6). These definitions were identified as pertinent to Sure Start's declared key principle of ensuring parental participation in all aspects of its programmes (Sure Start Unit, 2002) and subsequently were used as a discussion prompt in interviews.

1.3 Rationale for research

Commitment to, and evidence of, user involvement is now included as a central theme in the design and delivery of initiatives which impact upon individuals and their communities. An additional and increasingly prominent issue for scrutiny is the effectiveness and significance of the methods selected by service providers for promoting consultation and participation (Gustafsson & Driver, 2005; Audit Commission, 2003).

Sure Start guidance places significant emphasis on the need for programmes to provide relevant and appropriate services to match the needs of the community. In acknowledging Jolly Giraffe's parents' group, the Parents' Forum, as the primary arena for parental feedback in the programme, a need was identified for an in-depth examination of its role, processes and impact.

1.4 Aim and objectives

The aim of this research was to evidence Jolly Giraffe's model for facilitating parental participation through examining the role of the Parents' Forum. The objectives for the research were to:

- gain a clear and comprehensive picture of the Forum as a mechanism for user involvement;
- clarify the role and purpose of the Parents' Forum;
- contextualise the Parents' Forum within the strategic and operational workings of Jolly Giraffe and the wider Sure Start remit;

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- chart the development of this specific approach to securing parental involvement in Jolly Giraffe;
 - promote understanding of the relevance and purpose of the Forum.

1.5 Presentation of research

Chapter 1 of this report presents a background to the research. Chapter 2 describes the research methodology and outlines the theories underpinning the research design. The research findings are set out in Chapter 3, the structure of this chapter reflects the themes set out in Section 2.2, which were the focus for the investigation. Quotations from participants have been used, where appropriate, for the purpose of illustration and clarification. Chapter 4 discusses the research findings.

Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The objectives identified (see Section 1.4) indicated the use of a qualitative approach to the research design. This in-depth approach to data gathering is aimed at allowing participants the opportunity to offer a comprehensive and detailed account of their views and experiences. Data are subsequently organised and analysed thematically whereby pre-selected and emerging themes are identified, explored and presented for consideration (Bryman, 2004). The findings from qualitative research, conducted with a small sample of participants, are therefore presented as being representative of the views and experiences of the participants themselves rather than those of the wider subject population.

2.2 Issues explored

In considering the objectives for the research, the following themes were identified as the focus for investigation:

- role and purpose of the Parents' Forum;
- evolution of Forum structure and procedures;
- parental partnership in Jolly Giraffe's decision making process;
- Management Board;
- communication and information pathways;
- benefits of participation – personal and operational;
- barriers to involvement.

2.3 Participants

The aim of the research was to examine the role, processes and impact of the Parents' Forum. In seeking to gather information on both procedures and outcomes, the views and experiences of stakeholders from the following groups were solicited:

- Parents' Forum members;
- programme staff;
- Management Board members;
- Jolly Giraffe service users - parents/grandparents and carers.

Although the research proposal identified parent members of the Management Board as participants the researcher was unable to secure interviews with any individuals from this stakeholder group.

The respondents in this study were assured that the information they shared would remain confidential to the researcher and would be anonymised for presentation in this report. To allow a system of verification and accountability for research findings however, the researcher allocated a number to each interview transcript which follows all quotations which appear in the report. For the purpose of this report, Parents' Forum members and Jolly Giraffe service users are referred to as 'parents'. This term includes parents, grandparents and carers.

2.4 Research methods

Three methods of data collection were used: a focus group; individual interviews; and a questionnaire. These are described in more detail below.

2.4.1 Focus group

Focus groups are commonly employed where it is considered that a group dynamic will encourage and stimulate discussion. The researcher facilitates discussion through introducing topics and asking the participants for their views and experiences (Gilbert, 2001). Interaction between group members provides a source of feedback which, by its nature, is absent from individual interviews.

The research exercise was discussed with parents during Forum sessions. The Community Development Worker (CDW) showed members the research proposal and a participant information sheet which explained their role, should they wish to participate in the research process (see Appendix 1). Forum members were invited, by the CDW to participate in a focus group and individual interviews. In order to facilitate attendance at the focus group it was scheduled to replace one of the Parents' Forum sessions, taking advantage of the crèche facilities already available for this day and time. A total of four members attended the focus group and with their permission the session was audio-taped.

2.4.2 Individual interviews

Interviews were arranged with a selection of relevant programme staff, Parents' Forum members and Management Board members. As described above, the research had been explained and discussed with Forum members and an invitation given to

participate. Due to the need to focus the research on a specific, often limited, group of individuals with knowledge and experience of a particular subject i.e. the Forum, a non-random or purposive sampling method was used (Gilbert, 2002). Thus, the CDW provided the researcher with the contact details of Forum members who had indicated their willingness to participate in individual interviews and, from these, two participants were secured.

Two key members of staff were identified as information sources and individual interviews were arranged with these participants and conducted at Halton Lodge Children's Centre. In the case of interviews with Management Board members the Programme Manager approached two Board members and secured their participation in the research. The researcher contacted these individuals and arranged to interview them in their place of work.

Interview schedules were designed to offer participants the opportunity to expand on the areas and issues pertinent to their particular experience of the Parents Forum' (see Appendices 2 and 3). With the permission of the interviewees, all interviews were audio-taped. Interviews were carried out with two members of Jolly Giraffe programme staff, two Parents' Forum members and two members of the Management Board.

2.4.3 Questionnaire

The researcher attended at two venues where Jolly Giraffe activities were taking place. Parents, grandparents and carers were approached, the purpose of the research explained and an invitation given to answer a brief questionnaire on their awareness and views of the Parents' Forum (see Appendix 4). These sessions took place on two occasions. A total of twelve questionnaires were completed.

2.4.4 Ethical considerations for the research

The ethical issues inherent in this research were covered under an existing ethics application to Cheshire Local Research Ethics Committee (LREC). Ethical approval was gained in June 2004.

Chapter 3

Findings

3.1 Introduction

The feedback gathered during this research exercise was analysed thematically (see Section 2.1). The research findings are thus presented thematically although, where appropriate, the respondent group category i.e. programme staff, Forum member or Management Board member is indicated in the text. The results from the service user questionnaire, due to the distinct feedback sought, are presented in a separate section at the end of this chapter.

3.2 Format of Parents' Forum

Jolly Giraffe parents group, referred to in this report as the Forum, meets on a weekly basis at 9.30 a.m. on Monday mornings. Attendance varies from week to week ranging between five and fourteen parents, grandparents or carers. The meetings, which are minuted, are followed by a craft activity or 'taster session' provided specifically for the parents group. This can consist of a course of sessions on a particular topic, for example painting or card making. Crèche facilities are open to parents attending the Forum and places in the crèche are allocated on a first come first served basis. Forum meetings are organised and facilitated by the CDW who also has operational responsibility for the Forum.

Interviewees who attended the Forum were overwhelmingly positive about its format. The informality of meetings emerged as a key factor in securing and maintaining parental involvement. Parents who attended the focus group and individual interviews were clear that a more formal approach to the Forum meetings would affect their willingness to participate. This feeling is illustrated in the quotations below:

'I wouldn't like it if it was stuffy and formal and I probably wouldn't come if it was.' (focus group).

'It is quite informal, think if it was formal it would put people off. If it suddenly went like a committee meeting I wouldn't be interested.' (4).

There are no target numbers for the Forum. To preserve the informality of the group, no expectations are placed on people to give a regular commitment to the Forum. However, a core group of people do attend the Forum regularly. New or occasional

members are welcome to attend and this results in a week by week variation in the size of the Forum group.

Minutes are taken at the Forum by the CDW, these are distributed to Forum members, Programme Manager and all programme staff. Information from these minutes is reproduced in a dedicated section of the Programme Manager's quarterly report to the Management Board. In order to effectively communicate and publicise the activities of the Forum, minutes are kept relatively jargon free and displayed on notice boards and in the Community Café. In acknowledging a reluctance expressed by members to be identified as the source for particular comments, feedback in the Forum minutes is anonymised.

3.3 Role and purpose of the Forum

In accordance with Sure Start Unit guidelines the Programme Manager is responsible for overseeing that the parents' group is given every opportunity to actively participate in the decisions made regarding the programme's development. The Management Board is charged with ensuring that user consultation and participation are evident in the programme's decision making processes.

Parents and staff alike viewed the Forum as an effective vehicle both for consultation and communication. Parents clearly recognised their advisory role in the consultation process, described by the following focus group participant:

'Ideas can be brought up by us or they can ask us what we think of an idea, is it any good or would it work? Someone can suggest something to (CDW) and she will run it by us. They do things on their own bat as well though.' (focus group).

Parents also considered their opinions and contributions were given due value and consideration. One participant commented:

'You put your ideas in and if they can do it they'll do it but if they can't you just accept it.' (focus group).

Forum members and programme staff pointed to the use of the Forum as a 'sounding board' for addressing the programme's wider strategic concerns as illustrated in the following quotation:

'Sharing the statistics with them, saying to them 'look there are over 1000 families in the area and only 200+ are accessing facilities – what can we do to change that?' (1).

Programme staff also noted that, besides contributing and advising, parents were also willing to question operational or strategic decisions. This was welcomed and encouraged with one respondent noting that:

'Parents get more confident, more willing to question, they'll ask "why are you doing that, where's the money coming from?" They'll say their bit about staffing as well say "why are you employing her if she's not running any groups?"' (1).

Programme staff and Management Board members considered the Forum to be vital to the effective running of Jolly Giraffe. Parental participation was identified as a major factor in protecting the sustainability of the programme, one participant described it thus:

'Because they are the people at the heart of it and they should be able to form what they want for, and in, their community.' (5).

Respondents felt that a failure to place parents in the driving seat would prejudice the programme's future, as illustrated in the following comment:

'We need to ensure that parents are involved... we don't want people to say 'oh Sure Start Jolly Giraffe, wasn't that something about.....?' If people feel that we are listening to them they are far more likely to come back.' (1).

The operation and activity of the group generates evidence, to fulfil both local and national Sure Start governance requirements, that operational decisions have been made in response to a need expressed at grass roots level. Proof of parental involvement needs to be visible before approval for proposed activities or changes in practice will be granted by the Management Board. The following observation also highlights a view expressed that users needed to be made aware of their significance to the governance process:

'One purpose for their involvement is for them to understand their role as a voice for the community and a respected driver for the programme.' (6).

The rationale for the Forum was seen by parents themselves as a need for a clear line of communication between service users and management. One parent stated that:

'It's giving you your say, to give you a choice and then they're not just putting on what they think, you've got a say in what activities are put on.' (4).

3.4 Outcomes

Parents were asked if they felt their views, as a group, were appropriately influential in Jolly Giraffe's decision making processes. One parent commented that:

'I definitely feel that the things we say and raise are considered and dealt with, I really do think we are partners.' (4).

Although respondents were unanimous in responding positively to the question of influence the view was also held that there was a clear, albeit welcome, distinction between the issues of influence and power. One parent described it thus:

'We have influence but I wouldn't say we had power. I wouldn't really like the power....it's nice to still have that 'out of it' thing where we can say what we think but can still say 'that's not my decision what goes on.' (3).

Programme staff and Forum members were asked for some examples of the outcomes of their partnership. Staff spoke of the effect that consultation with parents had on the efficient targeting of resources. Also emphasised during these discussions was the positive experience of 'skills sharing' sessions that had taken place during the summer. Taster sessions, often run by service providers, are suspended during the summer months. In order to maintain the momentum of the Forum, members of the group identified their particular hobbies or skills and stood in as session tutors. Sessions were run in such subjects as knitting, card making, tray baking and cross stitch. The sense of achievement and satisfaction gained from this information sharing partnership was notable. Forum members had also advised the CDW on the range of courses offered to parents.

Parents had also prompted a review of the most effective use of the Centre's light and soft play room. Access to this room was originally dependent upon there being a Centre worker present. Forum members had commented that this resulted in the room, which was a valuable resource, being underused. The issue was discussed at staff team meetings and a decision was made at the Management Board that, following training sessions and risk assessments, parents be allowed to access this facility without the presence of a worker.

The Parents' Forum minutes clearly outline the agenda and deliberations of the group regarding issues raised by the CDW. Jolly Giraffe documentation highlights the use of the group in an advisory capacity, drawing upon their *'direct knowledge and experience of: bringing up a small child; being on the receiving end of services for all children and families; living in the Sure Start area and being part of the community'* (Jolly Giraffe

Delivery Plan, 2003). A clear example of the practical and empathetic element which parents' experiences can bring to discussions was highlighted in Forum minutes. One particular meeting saw parents asked to consider and comment upon a draft list of group rules for children's conduct during play sessions. One rule stated that a parent may be asked to leave if their child's behaviour became dangerous to themselves or other children. Parents drew attention to the effect which asking a person to leave would have on their self-esteem and the inappropriate message that participation was dependent on your child behaving perfectly. They went on to point out that it was often the parents of difficult children who needed the most help and support. Minutes showed that such views and suggestions regarding this and certain other rules resulted in a partial re-working of the list.

3.5 Recruitment and attendance

The promotion of the Forum is primarily the responsibility of the CDW. The Forum is advertised in the Jolly Giraffe newsletter and leaflets are also distributed to all staff and service providers to be given out to the families and service users they come into contact with. One member of staff made the following point:

'We do our best to promote the Parents' Forum far and wide – the one thing we don't want is a clique.' (1).

On an operational level, staff are expected to be aware of all activities running throughout the programme and take responsibility for the promotion of all services, including the Parents Forum.

In response to the need for an informal tone, literature aimed at promoting the Parents Forum refers to meetings as 'Coffee Mornings'. Indeed, some parents interviewed failed to recognise the term Parents Forum, referring to it instead as the 'Monday coffee morning'. Considering the use of this term one parent commented that

'You have to make sure its attractive to the people who are going to be coming. Coffee morning sounds better, more relaxed, less serious.' (3).

Whilst one parent felt that such a low-key, casual approach could negatively impact upon recruitment efforts, another member believed that this use of terminology was deliberate. She commented:

'If you tried to get people involved by telling them how important it is it would put them off, be quite frightening. The way they've done it is friendly so people want to go. It's how you word it as

well as what you say like 'come along and have a chat' is much nicer.' (3).

This view seemed supported by feedback gathered during discussions with programme staff who emphasised the point that, in the past, a formal tone had possibly discouraged some parents.

A theme expanded later in this document is the importance which was placed, during focus group and parent interviews, on the pivotal role the CDW played in encouraging and maintaining levels of attendance. Attention was also drawn to the influence which session workers can have on prompting parents to give the Forum a try.

Parents were asked how they had become involved in the Forum. The majority had been encouraged to attend by either the CDW or someone already involved with the Forum. One parent, who had now been attending regularly for nearly twelve months, had initially accessed the group to take advantage of the guaranteed place on a 'taster session'. Several parents observed that although they had read about the 'coffee morning' in the newsletter they had needed to know there would be a friendly face before they were confident enough to drop-in. One parent commented:

'It's the first coming through the door that's the problem.' (focus group).

One member talked about how she had co-opted another onto the Forum:

'I asked her was she interested in coming and she hadn't heard about it and she asked where is it and I actually brought her down the corridor and showed her the room.' (focus group).

It was observed, during focus group and programme staff interviews, that the summer months had seen a higher level of attendance. This was partly attributed to term time commitments for those parents attending college courses as once September came numbers decreased.

In examining the question of recruiting parents onto the Forum, the wider issue of attracting new service users to the programme itself was raised and discussed, particularly by Forum members. Parents and programme staff referred to the discussion, in Forum meetings, of strategies and approaches to attracting new users. Parents interviewed displayed evident commitment to tackling this wider strategic concern and were particularly keen to acknowledge the efforts which programme staff had put in to attracting new parents. One parent made the following observation:

'They've tried everything, I don't think they can do any more. They tried to promote it in the shopping centre, did a really nice display but the people who approached them were just people they already knew coming over to say hello.' (4).

Forum members voiced strong feelings when considering the issue of non-take up of services. The level of criticism aimed at those not accessing services appeared fuelled by a sense of loyalty to the Jolly Giraffe programme. Some members showed some resentment that others, for whom the services have been created, refused to use them, illustrated by the following comment:

'I don't even work there and I get disappointed and frustrated about people (in the community) who have all this provided for them and don't want to get up off their backsides because they just can't be bothered.' (4).

Discussions with programme staff and management board members revealed a pragmatic view of the recruitment task with one staff member stating:

'We've tried school gate, free courses, free child care, evening/weekend sessions - with not much success. At the end of the day some people won't want to become involved no matter how you approach it but as long as we are continually trying to reach them.' (1).

3.6 Development of approach

Discussions with programme staff charted the changes which had taken place in the structure of the Forum since its setting up at the start of the Jolly Giraffe programme in 2003. Staff were keen to point out that all the modifications had been generated by the group and that the success of the present format was due to their dictating the pace. The following comment was made:

'Although it is hard work taking all the twists and turns I do believe that the more you take the more likely you are to get to the right place.' (2).

Information shared regarding the evolution of the Forum into its current form highlighted the strategic and practical responses to both opportunities for and barriers to participation. The Forum's history has seen the introduction, review or modification of a number of different aspects, which are explored below.

3.6.1 Format

Programme staff emphasised their belief that the success of the Parents Forum was largely due to the focus which had been placed on a user-led approach in its development. This opinion was consistently supported in discussions with Forum

members where accompanying feelings of 'ownership' were expressed. Originally expected to be quite formal in tone with a pre-set agenda, this model did not work and the resulting loss of numbers prompted a more informal approach to meetings. The meetings are, however, minuted by the CDW. One programme member explained:

'Despite the informal approach we were very clear about the need to keep some formality of structure to ensure that information is passed to them for them to consider and comment on. Hence the informal chat/formal discussion balance.' (2).

In order to improve feedback from Management Board to the Forum, a recent development has been the attendance of the Programme Manager at some Forum meetings. An additional benefit intended was an increase in parents' knowledge and understanding of issues, thus enhancing their ability to meaningfully participate in decision making. One parent commented that:

'(name) coming in, I like that I find it really interesting because its more about getting your brain working. Some may just want to come to the group and don't want to hear about management things but I do.' (4).

Whilst this had undoubtedly improved the 'communication loop' operating between parents and Management Board, not all members felt it was conducive to an atmosphere for information sharing. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

'There's a difference in the group when (name) attends. People seem more self conscious about sharing their opinions you know everyone knows she's the big boss.' (3).

3.6.2 Taster sessions

Both staff and parents commented upon the successful introduction of 'taster sessions' as a means of improving Forum attendance. Courses offered to Jolly Giraffe service users become booked up very quickly whereas the 'taster sessions' are run specifically for Forum members. These arts and crafts sessions which immediately follow Forum meetings were introduced very much as a way of making meetings more attractive to potential and existing members. The informal 'drop-in' format of the Forum and accompanying taster session can also prove more convenient for some parents as places on the courses run by service providers often necessitate a twelve week commitment.

3.6.3 Frequency and time

Equally influential in optimising attendance levels has been the time and frequency of meetings. Initially held on a weekly basis, staff felt that this created unrealistic pressures to address and resolve issues raised in time for the next meeting. However, changing the frequency to a monthly basis resulted in a loss of momentum, and a marked drop in attendance. Subsequent discussions with parents revealed their preference for the weekly meetings. It was agreed that weekly updates by the CDW on the progress of comments/suggestions raised would provide a satisfactory level of feedback.

Meetings are held on a Monday morning at 9.30 a.m. A repeated observation by parents was that meeting first thing on a Monday morning presented a much needed, (and seldom available) opportunity to offload and unwind after the stresses of the weekend or that morning's school run. One parent stated that:

'I go because I have to get out of the house and I can go there, I know my child's safe in the crèche, and I can sit in peace and have a cup of tea and some toast and a chat.' (3).

3.6.4 Crèche facility

Programme staff described how, following representations by parents, the number of crèche workers had been increased. From an early stage in the Forum's development the issue of limited access to crèche places had been identified as a barrier to participation. Some parents recounted the experience of having arrived to take part in the Forum only to be told that the crèche, run on a 'first come first served' basis, was full.

Programme staff also felt that that this increase had been equally important in persuading existing members to promote the Forum amongst other Jolly Giraffe parents. The view was expressed that parents, asked to promote the Forum, were concerned about the effect which increased demand for the crèche would have on the likelihood of them securing places.

3.7 Management Board

An issue highlighted during discussions was the recruitment of parent members onto the Management Board. At the time of data collection the Management Board had lost four of its five parent members through their recruitment onto college courses or their

children reaching school age. Discussions with all participants revealed some difficulties with the promotion of Management Board participation amongst the existing group of Forum members. In light of this feedback was sought, from the focus group and parent interviewees, on their knowledge and understanding of participation at Management Board level. Discussion also took place with all participants around barriers to involvement at Management Board level and ways of facilitating participation (see Appendices 2 and 3).

3.7.1 Perceptions of Management Board

Although none of the Forum members interviewed had actual experience of participating at Management Board, they were asked how they would feel about contributing in this forum. The responses to this question showed little variation in the view that this would be a formal and thus intimidating arena to enter. One parent described it thus:

'If you go in there with all the bigwigs sitting there with their briefcases and that and you're sitting there a lonely mother thinking 'what the hell am I supposed to say?' (focus group).

However, despite the reservations voiced by all members, three out of the six interviewed said they were interested in participating on the Management Board.

'I know some wouldn't want to do it but I would, some think they won't be listened to.....I'd be shaking in my boots but I would speak up if I thought it would benefit.' (4).

Discussions with all participants provided further insight into the factors affecting the willingness of Forum members to become involved in the Management Board. Programme staff and Management Board members believed that there was a reluctance and lack of confidence in ability to assume responsibility for representing their own views and the views of others at Board level. One member of the programme staff remarked:

'It's not just about getting them to trust us it's about getting them to trust themselves as well.' (1).

One Forum member explained herself thus:

'I would like to go to the management board because that's the type of person I am but I wouldn't like the power to say "that's my final decision" because at the end of the day you're not going to please everyone.' (3).

Feedback from Forum members themselves clearly showed a significant level of unease with the prospect of interacting with professionals in an unfamiliar environment.

A certain amount of the negative feedback appeared equally attributable to a lack of confidence in contributing as an individual rather than as part of a group. The following explanation was given during focus group discussions:

'If they sat in with the eight of us you've got eight people putting things to them but if its just you ...if there's something you'd feel uncomfortable saying you wouldn't feel bad saying it to them if they came here.'(focus group).

3.7.2 Facilitating participation

In considering parents' actual experience of participating on the Management Board, Board members interviewed were keen to emphasise the commitment and effort which went in to putting parent members at their ease and encouraging participation.

'The Board members are asked not to use jargon as it can be exclusionary and intimidating and the chair is very good and asks parents to 'come in at any point.' (2).

The observation was made however that, despite this encouragement, not all parent members were comfortable contributing their views.

'They are frequently asked if they understand and are happy with the different issues discussed, however they're not very vocal although I think this is common on other programme boards.' (5).

In response to the issue of recruitment, programme staff clearly felt that meaningful participation was dependent upon parents joining the Management Board as a result of their own desire to do so rather than pressure from staff.

'There are targets in place for board membership for parents and we are aware that with enough cajoling and coaxing parents would join up. However this isn't the right approach, its far more meaningful if parents do this when they are ready, its about listening to them.' (2).

Forum members were asked what, if anything, would influence their willingness to contribute at Management Board level. Attention was again drawn to the high level of satisfaction which Forum members felt for the self-styled, informal format of the Forum meetings. One interviewee commented:

'We'd all much prefer it if they came and sat here with us, they'd learn more and its less intimidating for a parent as well because you feel as if you're being judged if you go into something like that.'(focus group).

Programme staff reported that this preference for the Parents Forum style of meeting had been highlighted during previous consultations with parents to identify ways of

facilitating participation. In response to negative feelings expressed regarding the formality of the Management Board, parents had also been asked to identify alternative ways of making their contribution to the decision making process. This issue was being considered and discussed at Forum meetings.

Programme staff and Management Board members were asked for their views regarding support for parents participating at Management Board level (see Appendix 3). Some comments and suggestions from Management Board members for facilitating involvement drew on their knowledge and experiences of other local Sure Start programmes. One member stated:

'There is a need to ensure that support enables participation, maximising opportunities for participation is an area for development across all programmes.' (6).

Repeated reference was made to the need for a strategy to be put in place regarding relationship building between Board and Forum members. Attention was drawn by one member to the mentorship arrangement in place on some programme boards. One outcome of this is that the mentor i.e. Board member, and parent travel to and from the meeting together thus providing both parties with the opportunity to build a relationship. A simpler idea was for time to be allocated before or after the meeting for parent and non-parent Board members to meet informally. Another idea, again taken from the approach of another programme, was for the Community Development Worker to accompany parents to the Management Board. The presence of a familiar and friendly face, whose role is to offer support, promotes the confidence which new members need to articulate their views and fully participate.

The maturity of programmes was felt, by one respondent, to be a key factor in securing full parental participation at Management Board level. In this way, 1st wave programmes, which had had longer to develop, had strong parent participation on Management Board with one particular programme having a parent as Chair of the Board.

All respondents identified the need for a focused strategy to address preparation for the Management Board. Work had already taken place around jargon busting whereby a list of explanations of terms and abbreviations had been compiled for parents to reference. Familiarisation and relationship building were considered key areas of work. In response to this assessed need, arrangements were in place for Forum members to take turns accompanying the Programme Manager to a Board meeting. The

attendance of the Programme Manager at Forum meetings was also expected to strengthen the link between the Management Board and Forum. One Management Board member emphasised the importance which should be placed on communicating the significance of the Forum's role:

'We have a duty to make them aware that their contributions are valued and that the balance of power is equal otherwise they will feel deflated and powerless. We should never dictate, we should facilitate.' (5).

3.7.3 Management Board training

Following consultation with Forum members regarding barriers to Management Board participation, an arrangement has been made for parents to access a training programme run by Sure Start Seals. Feedback from the Seals programme manager highlighted the role that parents had played in identifying and selecting the following as the primary issues for focus which the course covers:

- confidence building;
- jargon busting;
- financial/budgetary information;
- Sure Start structures, for example groups, sub-groups.

3.8 Partnership

In response to the question of partnership in the decision making process, Forum members held the clear view that the Forum's comments and suggestions had a significant impact on the decisions made at Management Board level. In relation to the Management Board, programme staff and management board members were asked to consider the issue of parents as equal partners in Jolly Giraffe's actual decision making processes. All respondents expressed their wholehearted commitment to the principle of partnership and power sharing. For example, one interviewee commented:

'Parents are definitely considered and treated as equal partners on the board. We've got some really good board members and a really good chair who is 100% behind parents participation.' (2)

The benefits of a genuine partnership approach were considered equally important.

'Particularly when involved in discussion of investment of capital and revenue, parents have asked some very difficult questions which is fantastic. It makes us as professionals examine our decisions more closely.' (6).

Whilst commitment to the principle of partnership was highlighted as central to achieving meaningful participation, one respondent emphasised the need for a genuine commitment to it as a protracted and sometimes bumpy process. A lack of appropriate skills was identified as a barrier to genuine partnership. This individual stated:

'Really I suppose the parents aren't equal partners because they aren't yet equipped with the skills for full participation on the Management Board.' (1).

3.9 Communication

Data were analysed to identify the information pathways employed at Jolly Giraffe to ensure communication between the parents, programme staff and Management Board members. In emphasising the partnership principle inherent in securing meaningful parental participation, one member of the programme staff was keen to identify a 'communication loop' (2), rather than referring to information being 'fed up to' or 'down from' the Management Board. Figure 3.9.1 (overleaf) illustrates the lines of communication for information sharing between stakeholders in Jolly Giraffe's approach to parental participation.

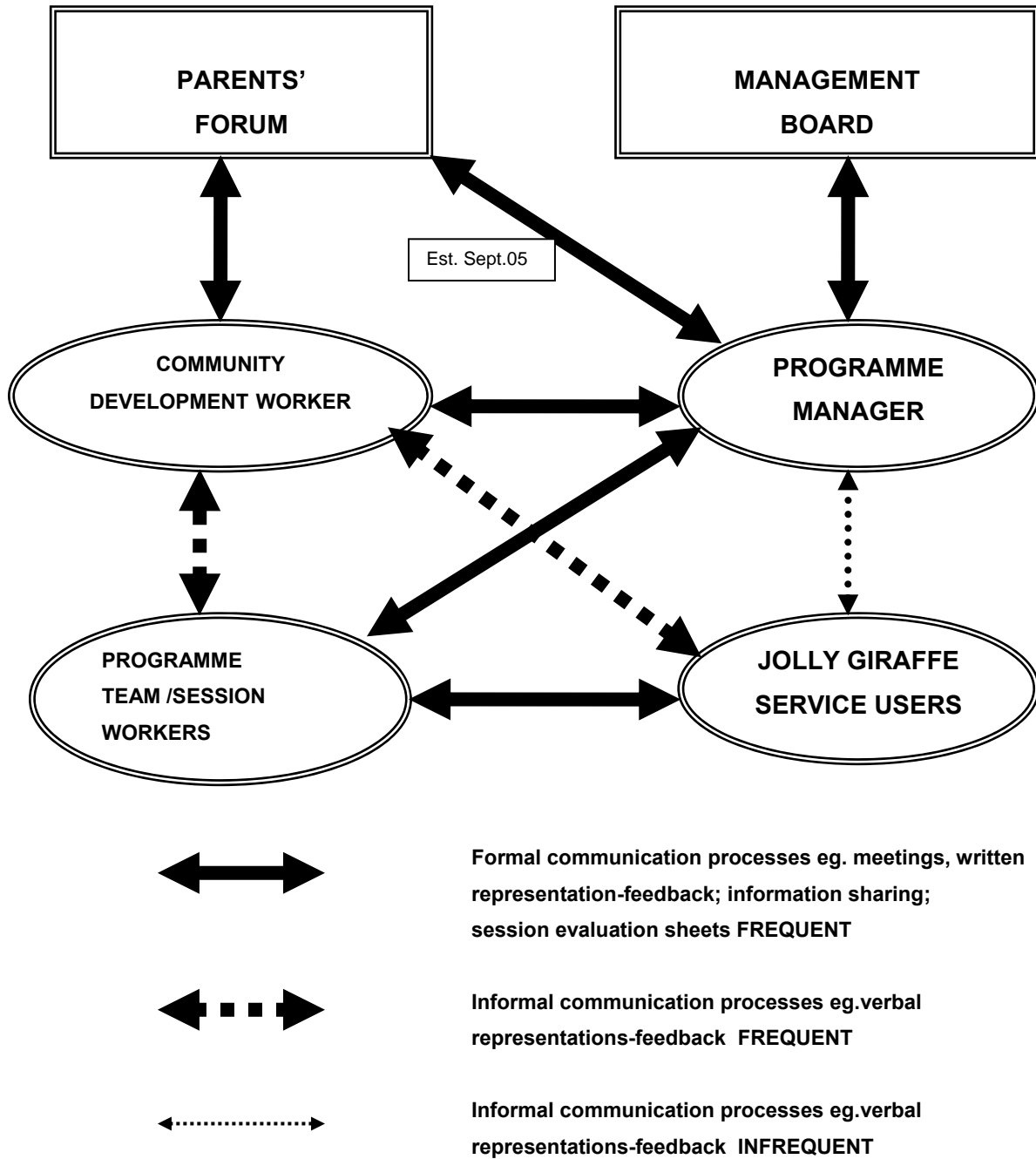
3.9.1 Community Development Worker

All respondents identified the pivotal role which the CDW played in facilitating information sharing between Management Board and the Forum. The CDW was also a familiar face for the wider population of parents and thus approached by non-Forum members wishing to raise issues. This observation was repeatedly borne out in the feedback gathered from the service users who participated in the general survey (see Appendix 4). The majority of these respondents said that they would approach the CDW if they wanted to make a comment or suggestion about activities or services. Requests and comments made to session workers were also passed on to the CDW. In addition to 'chairing' the Forum the CDW produces the minutes from meetings. Forum members were clearly happy with the use of minutes as an appropriate and effective record of the Forum's discussions. A high degree of confidence was expressed in the CDW's commitment to keeping them informed of the progress of their comments and suggestions. One interviewee commented:

'She always comes back and tells us exactly what she's done with what we said so we know that she hasn't just crossed it off, we know it's being dealt with. We always get feedback.' (3).

The CDW was also identified by Forum members as their primary source of feedback and information from the Management Board. In addition to informal feedback from the Programme Manager, the CDW is given an edited copy of Management Board

Figure 3.9.1. Jolly Giraffe Communication Pathways for Parental Participation



minutes from which she presents relevant comments and feedback to the Forum members, as explained by one interviewee:

'We get plenty of feedback, she comes in with her folder with minutes and her notes and details of any feedback.' (4).

Programme staff observed that, historically, parent members of the Management Board who were still involved with the Forum would provide informal feedback during Forum meetings. The loss of this 'link' had resulted in the CDW becoming the chief conduit for Management Board feedback.

3.9.2 Programme Manager

Forum members displayed an obvious degree of familiarity when referring to the Programme Manager. All referred to her by her first name and, despite references to her as the 'boss', were keen to identify her as friendly and approachable. The recent introduction of Programme Manager visits to the Forum meetings appeared to build on this established relationship. This move was identified by programme staff as part of a focused strategy aimed at strengthening the information pathway between the Board and the Forum. This recently formalised communication pathway is included in Fig.3.9.1. An additional desired outcome from these visits is to increase parents' knowledge and understanding of strategic issues which impact upon the programme management. This enhanced level of understanding was identified by one respondent as a crucial factor for full and meaningful participation. Key staff were confident that formal and informal communication between them also allowed for regular review and monitoring of progress and outcomes for the Forum.

3.10 Benefits of participation

Participants were asked for their thoughts on the personal benefits for parents involved with the Parents' Forum. Individuals were also asked to consider the advantages which the programme itself had experienced from involving parents in its decision making processes.

3.10.1 Personal

Forum members were asked if they felt they, as individuals, had benefited from their involvement in the Forum. Respondents were asked to identify any skills they felt they had gained or developed. An increase in confidence emerged as a key outcome as did a feeling of self-worth, as illustrated in the following quotation:

'Even though I'd worked before being at home had made my confidence take a nose dive. I do enjoy it, you feel like you've got a say and that what you say can make something happen.' (4).

Some members attributed their growth in confidence to involvement in decision making processes, a view expressed in individual interviews and in the focus group:

'It's made me feel that even though I'm not working at the moment I am involved in something a bit more important than just attending a group or activity. You know you're negotiating for things and discussing stuff, I've got a lot out of it.' (4).

'Even though I'm a grandmother I'll need to go back to work when my grandson goes to school. Being a part of making decisions has boosted my confidence.' (focus group).

Some members felt that their willingness to approach new experiences had been due to the supportive environment of the Forum. One focus group member stated:

'I probably wouldn't have had the confidence to try some of the things I've had a go at, I've really enjoyed them. I think you're more ready to try the different courses through the Forum because you know each other.' (focus group).

For those members who had experience of social isolation, the Forum had presented them with a safe and non-threatening environment to start re-engaging socially. One mother commented:

'I had post-natal depression for six months, I didn't go out of the house. I came to a yoga course and then to the coffee mornings (Forum) it helped me through my depression. I'm at groups now nearly every day, doing Maths and English so I can help my children when they go to school.' (focus group).

Several Forum members believed that 'taster sessions' had provided them with the extra confidence they needed to access more formal courses. For example one parent stated:

'The taster sessions have given me the confidence to sign up for full twelve week courses. I'm dyslexic and I need to be able to help my son with his homework so I'm doing a certificate in English and I really enjoy it.' (3).

Raising the question of skills for employment provoked two Forum members to comment on their discomfort with what they considered an increasing emphasis by the adult learning service providers on the issue of employment, illustrated in the following quotation:

'The adult learning people do make you feel a bit under pressure to get a job – I came to join in a group, not to get a lecture about going back to work.' (3).

Interviews with programme staff and Management Board members solicited their views on the personal gains for parents who participate in the Forum or the Management Board. One respondent commented that:

'The major gain for both parents and the programme is a knowledge of the programme in its wider strategic remit. Parents make the transition from coming in with a more self-focused approach to suggesting things to developing an understanding of the wider implications and limitations for managing programme activities.' (2).

Programme staff felt that, despite the diversity in age and lifestyle, the atmosphere of mutual support and respect amongst group members was marked. Allowing time for members to unwind and offload at the start of meetings was believed to provide a vital opportunity for support networks to foster and develop. One member of staff explained it thus:

'We needed to strike a balance because we knew that the issue of social support was important for members. We recognised that for some people a need to start the session with an opportunity to offload made too formal a setting and agenda unworkable.' (2).

3.10.2 Operational

Programme staff and Management Board members were asked how they thought the work of the Parents Forum supported and enhanced the running of Jolly Giraffe. Respondents made frequent reference to the effect which consultation with service users had on the efficient and appropriate use of resources, illustrated in the following comment:

'Instead of introducing something that we think is a good idea we consult with them and this saves all of us a lot of wasted effort and resources.' (1).

One respondent commented on the advantages of consulting on the practical, everyday aspects of running the programme. Parents had pointed out an issue which users of the community café had over the cleaning of highchairs. Through identifying and formalising where the responsibility for this task lay, the dissatisfaction which service users had been voicing amongst themselves for some time, was quickly resolved. Another respondent identified the work of the Forum as a:

'practical and invaluable contribution to operational decisions. A number of outreach sessions were set up for the purchase of safety equipment – it was a parent who noticed that the times that the service was available wasn't convenient for people with childcare responsibilities.'(6).

One participant pointed to the involvement of parents in the recruitment of staff. The view was made that this not only benefited the interview process but also supplemented the knowledge and skills base of the interview panel itself.

One Board member explained that each Board meeting includes the review of a particular service, looking at its Public Service Agreements, inputs and outcomes. This respondent emphasised the resulting effect on parents' understanding of processes and structures. Reference was also made to the opportunity the Forum meetings offered for staff to present and explain programme strategies or practices. An additional consideration was the likelihood that this information would, in turn, be passed on to other parents. One Board member made the following observation:

'They can increase their knowledge and understanding of the systems and procedures and hopefully pass this information on to other parents so it's a shared benefit.' (5).

One respondent pointed out that, without the existence of the Forum, the programme could not be delivered. In noting the responsibility placed on programmes to ensure parental involvement in the design and delivery of programmes, proof of consultation with the Forum also legitimised many strategic and operational decisions. One programme member reported that Forum minutes are also employed as supporting evidence when identifying, in accordance with Sure Start guidelines, the targets which a proposed activity supports.

3.11 Barriers to involvement

Participants were asked what issues they considered to be instrumental in affecting the ability and willingness of parents to participate in both the Parents Forum and the Management Board. The feedback presented here is intended as a supplement to points made in relation to recruitment and attendance (Section 3.5) and the facilitation of Management Board participation (Section 3.7.2).

3.11.1 Personal barriers

Discussions with one member of programme staff raised the issue of confidence and the need for individuals to feel relaxed about voicing their opinions. This respondent felt

that an achievement would be for parents to see their comments, whether critical or complementary, as a positive force for the effective management of Jolly Giraffe:

'Sometimes people feel really frightened about committing themselves – they'll say "don't tell them I said that."' (1).

This reluctance to speak out was re-emphasised as a particular barrier for Management Board participation. One Board member explained that:

'The consequence of involvement seems greater at Management Board level and this acts as a deterrent to joining.' (6).

The perceived 'stigma' of accessing Sure Start services was pointed out in interviews with both Forum and Board members. One Forum member commented that:

'The sign outside saying 'Children's Centre' should say 'Sure Start – playgroups, crèches available.' When I first came in I was worried someone would see me.' (focus group).

Respondents were clear that this was due to misconceptions regarding the nature and purpose of services. A Board member explained it thus:

'Some people still think that it's linked to Social Services and perceptions are that it's for families with problems. These issues need addressing, should be about inclusivity and giving everyone the best possible chance.' (5).

3.11.2 Practical barriers

Programme staff confirmed that the issue of crèche availability had sometimes played a key part in preventing parents from attending the Forum. Although the Forum members are still subject to the 'first come, first served' criteria for places, the increase in crèche staff had considerably alleviated this problem. As previously mentioned this increase had also affected parents' willingness to promote the Forum amongst other service users.

Transport was also identified as a significant problem for some parents. The geographical spread of Jolly Giraffe means that not all venues are equally convenient for parents to attend. One parent pointed out that:

'if you live in Palacefields and have to get to the Children's Centre it's difficult without a car, you have to rely on the buses and you can't take the pram on some buses.' (focus group).

In response to uncertainties voiced by parents over bus routes and times, liaison with Haltons 'Neighbourhood Travel Team' has allowed the CDW to access accurate and

up to date information about routes, times and pram access on buses which she then communicates to parents.

One member of programme staff talked about the implications this had for the planning of activities with the need for constant assessment of the appropriateness of venues in meeting the needs of all parents in the Jolly Giraffe area. However, attention was brought to the negative effect which having a 'rolling venue' for Forum meetings had had on attendance. Thus the last twelve months has seen all Forum meetings held at Halton Lodge Children's Centre. Geographical issues were considered by one respondent to be both a practical and psychological barrier to involvement. The need to address this was considered particularly important for the up-coming strategical transition to Children's Centre, the consequence of which will be an increased emphasis on joint working. The following observation was made by one Management Board member:

'The attitude that 'parents from there don't come here', there is a role for marketing in relation to this. We have to get better at this particularly now that we are merging the Children's Centre strategy with the extended schools strategy. We should be going in to schools, talking with parents and working with schools as partners.' (6).

Discussions during this interview also highlighted the belief in the need to protect and preserve an atmosphere for transparency and dialogue amongst stakeholders. Discussions also identified that certain barriers to involvement were an integral part of all programmes, illustrated in the following statement:

'We do have a remit which we have to work to, we are led by performance indicators and targets and some barriers can be around allowing parents to experiment for themselves and take control.' (6).

3.12 Effectiveness

Participants were asked for their views regarding the Parents' Forum being representative of the Jolly Giraffe service users. Feedback was also solicited on the Forum as an appropriate and efficient vehicle for parental participation.

Programme staff and Board and Forum members alike were aware that neither the Forum members, nor the views they expressed, were representative of Jolly Giraffe's service user population. However this was not considered to negate the value of their contribution, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

'We can never expect them to reflect the views of the 200 or so families in the community who use Jolly Giraffe but they are a voice and they are an important voice.' (6).

One respondent observed that the core group of Forum members were instantly identifiable and were also the most regular participants in other sessions, a point borne out in discussions with Forum members themselves. This respondent commented that there could thus be a degree of uniformity in these parents' experiences of Jolly Giraffe's services. Another respondent however drew attention to the relative diversity in the group profile.

'There's a good mix of characters within the group, parents of different ages, grandparents, parents at different stages of the parenting process.' (2).

A point borne out in the service user survey results was that parents viewed the CDW and other members of programme staff, rather than Forum members, as the people with whom to raise comments. One Forum member pointed out that:

'I don't think that parents think of us as representatives – I mean they wouldn't come to us and say "would you raise that?"' (4).

The point was repeatedly made that no expectations were placed on members to solicit or present the views of other parents. Consultation with other parents did occur on an informal basis, often when Forum members had been asked their opinion of particular issues. One Forum member commented on the difficulties they had experienced seeking feedback from service users:

'We do present our own views but we do try to do other parents as well but its hard getting their opinions off them...they could try sending out a questionnaire to see what people like and don't like but its getting them to fill it in.' (3).

One member of programme staff reported the possible introduction of a new measure for soliciting feedback from the wider parent group. A suggestion had been for Forum members to visit sessions in twos to promote the Forum and gain feedback from service users.

Discussions with programme staff highlighted that their satisfaction with the Forum as a vehicle for user involvement was very much linked to a feeling that considerable time and effort had been invested in its development. One respondent observed that:

'There is a sense of pride, not just in the group itself but in the effort which has gone in to making it what it is today – the fine tuning so to speak.' (2)

In considering the operational effectiveness of the Forum model, the skill of the CDW as a moderator was identified as vital in ensuring that less confident members and potential members are overshadowed by more forceful and vocal members. The instrumental role of the CDW was also emphasised in discussions with Forum members who were keen to attribute a large degree of responsibility for their enthusiasm for the Forum to the CDW. For example, the following comments were made:

'It's mostly due to (CDW)'s personality, she makes everyone feel welcome and involved and always asks for your opinion. I think if you changed the person you would have problems.' (3).

'Although you know she's there on behalf of Sure Start you feel she's one of us.....maybe if it was a different person I wouldn't go regularly.' (4).

In addition to acknowledging the role which parents' backgrounds play in their willingness and ability to participate, one respondent also drew attention to the influence which the group dynamic has on group functioning. One Board member commented on the effectiveness of the Forum in identifying and reviewing the practicality of services.

'We can do a needs analysis, look at a range of indices to see what's needed in a locality but in the real world you need to discuss these things with members of the community and get their feedback.' (6).

Several respondents felt that long-term success depended upon staff and Forum members ensuring that the group did not become 'insular' or 'closed'. This point was also made in discussions regarding good practice on other Sure Start programmes. Equally, the revitalising effect of new members on the group dynamic was identified as crucial to the effectiveness and sustainability of parents groups.

Programme staff and Management Board members were asked to consider the categorisations (see Section 1.2), identified in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's review of relevant documentation regarding community involvement (ODPM, 2005). Respondents were asked to identify which category they thought Jolly Giraffe's approach to parental involvement best corresponded to. Three of the four respondents were clear that the scope of Jolly Giraffe's approach to parental participation reached beyond the first category of **information and consultation** and correlated more closely with the category of **deliberative engagement**. Further discussion showed this allocation to be linked to a strong conviction that parents played an integral and

decisive role in Jolly Giraffe's decision making processes. One respondent identified **information and consultation** as she felt that there was lack of sufficient consistency in participation at all levels of the decision making process i.e. poor Management Board representation.

3.13 Service user questionnaires

The researcher attended at two Jolly Giraffe activity venues, Halton Lodge Children's Centre and Glendale Community Centre in Palacefields. Service users were asked to answer a series of brief questions relating to their awareness and understanding of the Parents' Forum. A total of twelve questionnaires were completed. The findings of this mini survey are presented below:

- half of respondents had been using Jolly Giraffe services for less than one year and half for up to two years;
- over half had heard of the Parents' Forum. Nearly all of these had previously or were currently participating in the Forum;
- half of the respondents with experience of the Forum referred it as the 'coffee morning';
- those who had heard of the Forum but had no experience of attending identified what they understood it's purpose to be:

'they do newsletters and organise events' (5); 'they discuss what's going on in the groups.' (12).

- asked how they would pass on their comments or suggestions the majority of respondents indicated that they felt comfortable making their representations to staff members;
- half identified the CDW as the person they would approach. Two people referred to the evaluation sheets given out at the end of sessions as their preferred method of giving feedback;
- over three quarters of respondents felt that they had a say or influence in the activities run at Jolly Giraffe. Interestingly two of these ten respondents stated that this say or influence depended upon being involved with the Forum;
- respondents were asked would they be interested in participating in the Forum, one quarter of respondents were already participating in the Forum, a quarter cited work or college commitments as a barrier to involvement. Two respondents offered their position as a grandparent rather than a parent as reason for not being interested in participating;

-
- a quarter said that they would be interested in becoming involved if there were childcare or crèche facilities, these respondents were informed that crèche facilities were available.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This final section of the report aims to consider, and comment upon, the findings presented in Chapter 3, whilst reflecting upon their implications for Sure Start Jolly Giraffe's parental participation strategy.

4.1 Role and evolution of the Parents' Forum

Discussions with Jolly Giraffe Forum members revealed a high level of satisfaction with their experience of Forum participation. Sure Start Unit guidance relating to the creation of parents' groups places a clear obligation on programme partners to facilitate parental access through prioritising the needs of parents in the planning process (Sure Start Unit, 2002). This guidance avoids any reference to a prescriptive approach to promoting parental participation, rather local programmes are expected to develop their own 'best fit' for the community's involvement. In the case of Jolly Giraffe's Parents' Forum the informality of meetings has emerged as a key factor in securing and maintaining attendance. Through operating a relaxed, drop-in approach to attendance, the group is subject to a week by week change in profile and thus dynamic. Whilst this casual approach optimises the attraction of new members, it could also be considered a barrier to the group's development as momentum and continuity are affected. In acknowledging the demand for informality and the corresponding drop-in approach to attendance, the term 'Parents' Forum' appears to define an *arena* for communication and consultation rather than to a particular *group of individuals*.

The findings would indicate that the attendance of some members would not be assured if meetings became more formal. A prominent issue during interviews with all respondents was the need to adhere to a low-key, informal approach to the Parents' Forum. This, coupled with parents' discomfort with notions of power and responsibility, places certain limitations on options for developing a more visible, active role for the Forum within Jolly Giraffe. Whilst on many levels the programme is striving to promote and support the empowerment of its service users, the reluctance of Forum members to progress to a 'power-sharing' level of participation (Arnstein, 1969) presents some difficulty for those charged with this task.

Despite the lack of pressure on participants to formalise their commitment to Forum 'membership', regular Forum members displayed feelings of 'ownership' with regard to

the Forum. These feelings have possibly been influenced by the lead role which participants have played in driving and shaping the Forum's format. These factors have greatly influenced the member's commitment to participation in the programme. Equally marked during discussions with Forum members was a sense of pride in being involved in this level of Jolly Giraffe's decision making process. Programme staff themselves displayed quite marked feelings of pride in the work of the Forum. Their sense of achievement and satisfaction appears partly engendered by the time and effort which has been invested in building and developing what they believe to be a successful model for participation.

4.2 Communication

Forum members displayed a high level of satisfaction with the methods used for recording and processing their contributions. Discussions revealed participants to have a good awareness and understanding of the formal and informal systems in place for communicating their views. This degree of confidence would appear to have influenced the willingness of participants to invest their time and energies in the Forum. As part of a series of public sector briefing documents the Audit Commission has produced guidance, based on case studies, which aims to disseminate good practice for consulting and involving local people.

A major priority for people who are participating in consultations is that they can see the results of their contributions having an influence on decisions, policy and service development.....If participants are to recognise the effectiveness of their involvement, agencies need to plan for the communication of results and outcomes.

(Audit Commission, 2003. p.40)

As illustrated in Figure 3.9.1, communication lines between staff and the Forum are strong with Forum members expressing marked satisfaction with the efficiency of communication and feedback. Good levels of communication, both formal and informal, were also evident amongst staff directly involved with the Forum. The programme's procedures for monitoring and evaluation, which involves the formal review of progress and outcomes for individual services, are similarly applied to the Forum's operation.

An area for consideration and development is the link between the Forum and the wider parent group. Formalising opportunities for gathering feedback would considerably enhance the Forum's role as a voice for Jolly Giraffe service users. The

Forum would also benefit from the promotional effect of raising its profile, thus addressing the issue of recruitment.

Service user questionnaire results revealed a need for measures to increase awareness of the Forum amongst the Jolly Giraffe service user population. An additional area for attention is improving parents' understanding of the role and purpose of the Forum. Feedback from staff and Forum members (Section 3.5) would indicate that this lack of awareness and poor understanding of the Forum is an unintentional consequence of a deliberate strategy to 'play down' the Forum's importance.

4.3 Management Board

The importance of informality for securing parental participation in the Jolly Giraffe programme has been repeatedly highlighted. Forum members' negative reaction to the issues of power and responsibility are particularly pertinent to Management Board involvement. Equally, a perception amongst Forum members of the Management Board as a prominent, formal model of participation has significantly prejudiced and delayed the recruitment of new Board members. Although this issue has been recently resolved, with three Forum members preparing to join the Management Board, the lengthy recruitment period did result in an inadequate level of parental participation on the Management Board during that time. In order to avoid a reoccurrence of the setback to Management Board recruitment, future strategy should possibly focus on initiatives to foster and develop an on-going relationship between Forum and Board members.

A concentration of efforts on building a relationship between the Forum and the Management Board could also address the lack of formal and informal avenues of communication between these two bodies. The considerable degree of loyalty to the programme, evident amongst Forum members, offers a solid and opportune foundation for relationship building. Current actions to enhance information sharing between the Programme Manager and the Forum members will also serve to educate and familiarise members with aspects of the Board.

The task of empowering parents to fully participate at Board level will be greatly advanced by the arrangement for accessing the Sure Start Seals programme's Management Board training course. Time constraints will unavoidably affect the ability

and willingness of professionals to commit extra hours to partnership building, attempts should therefore be made to optimise the existing opportunities for contact.

4.4 Partnership

Sure Start guidance sets out six key characteristics for effective partnership; 'co-operation; listening to others; inclusiveness; accessibility; open communication; transparent process' (Sure Start Unit, 2002, p.4). Open and direct lines of communication have undoubtedly played a major role in developing a successful parent and staff partnership in the Parents' Forum. In acknowledging its use of skills sharing (Section 3.4); turn-taking – whereby members do not interrupt each other; and jargon-busting (Section 3.7.2), as aids to operating efficiently, the Forum plainly possesses many of the hallmarks of an effective partnership.

Attention has already been drawn to the pivotal role of the CDW in securing and maintaining the commitment of many Forum members. Whilst this is an essentially positive element of the Forum and a testament to skills in relationship building, the continued attendance of some members appears conditional upon the involvement of this member of staff. In light of findings regarding the issue of the Forum's lack of profile, this degree of dependency upon the CDW is possibly a further indication that the Forum members need to develop both a level of independence and an identity.

Whilst commitment to the principle of partnership was highlighted during discussions, attention was also drawn to the considerable time and effort involved in the pursuit of an appropriate and effective model for participation. Whilst, at the point of involvement, parent members of the Management Board are encouraged to participate, a lack of preparation will certainly affect their ability or willingness to do so.

4.5 Conclusion

The primary aim of this research was to serve as evidence of the role of the Parents' Forum in Jolly Giraffe's parental participation strategy. Through soliciting the views and experiences of a variety of stakeholders, a detailed and comprehensive picture of the Forum has been produced. This has permitted the in-depth analysis of information necessary to meet the original research objectives.

In examining the success of Jolly Giraffe's approach to promoting parental involvement, the fostering and development of such feelings of loyalty, satisfaction and significance amongst Forum members is noteworthy. Such an overwhelmingly positive response from Forum members would appear largely attributable to the time and effort which has gone in to shaping the meetings to meet the preferences and needs of the Forum members.

Attention has already been drawn to Forum members' desire for Management Board meetings to take place in more familiar, friendly surroundings, for example the Forum sessions. A view to consider is that, through introducing measures to promote familiarity amongst Board and Forum members, the relaxed and supportive Management Board environment which Forum members seek could be created. Approaches adopted by other programmes regarding Board members mentoring parent members and pre and post meeting 'chats' would appear to be feasible options to consider. An important point to re-iterate however, in referring to the practices of other programmes, is the effect which the maturity of a programme will have on the effectiveness of its approaches to participation. The approaches of other programmes should be used to inform good practice rather than to measure and compare progress.

The next year will see Jolly Giraffe and other local programmes evolve into the new role of Children's Centres, seeing an expansion of their remit to encompass a 'core offer' of integrated services for families with children under the age of five. Services will include early education, childcare, health and employment (Sure Start Unit, 2005). Parental participation will continue to be the key principle of Children's Centre services and the involvement of parents in strategic as well as operational decision making will be crucial (Sure Start Unit, 2005). Feedback from programme staff and Management Board members has highlighted that the meaningful involvement of parents at a strategic level of decision making i.e. on Management or Partnership Boards is very much influenced by their possessing the confidence and knowledge to do so. The new Children's Centre framework, will present less familiar arenas for parental participation in which less confident service users may be unwilling or unable to contribute their views and ideas. It is therefore vital to continue and, where possible, accelerate efforts to address those shortages in personal and practical skills which could prejudice parents' ability to participate in decision making processes.

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Appendix 1 – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Study of the role and effectiveness of Sure Start Jolly Giraffe Halton's Parent's Forum.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to examine the role of the Parent's Forum and the contribution it makes to the management and delivery of services on the Sure Start Jolly Giraffe Programme. In order to gain and present a clear picture of the Forum's development and activities it is important to consult with Forum members, parents, programme staff and Management Board members. Participants will be asked for their views on, and experiences of, the Parent's Forum.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are:

- A member of the Parent's Forum
- A parent/carer/grandparent who is accessing Sure Start services
- A member of staff on the Sure Start Jolly Giraffe programme
- A member of the Sure Start Jolly Giraffe Management Board

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

All participants will be asked for their views and experiences of involvement with the Parent's Forum. Individual interviews should last no more than an hour and with your permission will be audiotaped. Focus groups will also, with your permission, be audiotaped. The content of audiotapes and all information shared in the interview will remain confidential to the researcher. No names or details that could identify you will be used in any verbal or written report.

If you are member of the Parent's Forum you will be asked to participate in a focus group. In addition you may be asked to take part in follow-up individual interviews. If you decide to participate in the focus group you should keep this information sheet and sign the accompanying consent form.

A sample of Sure Start staff and Jolly Giraffe management board members will be asked to participate in individual interviews. These participants should also keep this sheet and sign the accompanying consent form.

What will happen to the results of the research?

A written report will be produced which will clarify and contextualise the role and impact of the Parent's Forum.

What are the possible disadvantages to taking part in this study?

There are no foreseen disadvantages in taking part in this study.

What are the benefits to taking part?

Contributing your views and experiences to gain a more comprehensive picture of the role and effectiveness of the Parent's Forum.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being funded by Sure Start Jolly Giraffe, Halton. A senior researcher from the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester will be conducting the study.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like any more information about the study before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact

Frances Mann or Cathy Perry on 01244 512059/512029 or write to them at the Centre for Public Health Research, University College Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Please read the above information and sign below if you consent to participate in this research exercise.

I agree to participate in (please tick as appropriate)

Focus group session (Parent's Forum members only)

Individual interview

Name:..... **Date:**

Signature:

**Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule: Focus Group and Parents’
Forum**

JOLLY GIRAFFE – HALTON
PARENTS FORUM MEMBERS
FOCUS GROUP & INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How did you (all) learn about the Forum?

2. Who or what prompted you to participate in the Forum?

3. What do you think the role of the Forum is?

Prompt: Why do you think the Forum was set up?

4. Do you see yourself(ves) as parent representatives? Do you think your role involves actively seeking comments and suggestions from parents?

If so.. How do you go about getting comments or suggestions from parents?

5. What about the Forum itself – do you think it has any power/influence over decision making?

Prompt: Do you feel your contributions are appropriately valued and considered?

6. Can you give me any examples of this?

Prompt: Have any of your suggestions been taken up.

7. How, if at all, do you feel the Forum has changed or developed?

Prompt: What, if any, changes have been made - for the worse or the better?

8. Are there any changes that you would like to see made?

9. What about you yourselves, do you feel that you as individuals have gained or developed any skills as a result of being involved in the Forum?

Prompt: self confidence, employment skills.

10. What would be your approach to involving parents in the running of Sure Start Jolly Giraffe?

Prompt: An alternative to parent's forum?

11. What about the Management Board – are you interested in contributing at that level?

If not, why is that – what would change your mind?

12. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you think should be talked about?

Thank you very much for talking to me.

Appendix 3 – Interview Schedule: Programme staff and Management Board

JOLLY GIRAFFE – HALTON

PROGRAMME STAFF & MANAGEMENT BOARD INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Background and development

1. What is the nature of your involvement with the Parent's Forum?
PS only
1. What do you consider the role of the Parents Forum to be?
MB only
2. What do you understand the purpose of the Parent's Forum to be?
3. How has the Forum evolved into its current form? What, if anything, has prompted changes?
4. Are you aware of any differences in this approach to parental participation compared with that of other Sure Start programmes?

Processes and Outcomes

5. How are parents informed about Parents Forum? How is involvement promoted/encouraged? **PS only**
6. Looking at the Halton area, what factors do you feel impact upon securing the involvement of parents in the Parent's Forum?
7. Participation in the Parent's Forum often precedes membership of management board. How are parents supported in the transfer to management board member? Do you feel enough is done to enable them to fully contribute to board meetings?
8. What do you feel are the personal gains for parents who participate in the Forum and on the Board?

9. What do you consider are the strengths of the Forum, as a means for achieving parental involvement?

Perceptions of model for involvement.

10. Research conducted for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) looked at several examples/approaches to community involvement and identified three broad categories. Here is a summary of their 'definitions'. (show sheet)

Which do you feel best describes the Parents Forum and which, in your opinion is the model which best meet the needs of Sure Start Jolly Giraffe's aims for parental participation.

11. What do you feel are the particular successes of the Parent's Forum?
12. How do you feel Jolly Giraffe benefits, both practically and strategically, from the inclusion of parents in the decision making process?
13. Looking at the decision making process within the programme do you feel that parents are equal partners?
If so please expand on this – examples?

If not what hinders this? – examples?
14. Do you feel there are any weaknesses in the Jolly Giraffe approach to securing parental participation?

Thank you for talking to me.

Appendix 4 – Questionnaire: Service Users

JOLLY GIRAFFE – HALTON

GENERAL QUESTIONNAIRE – PARENT SESSIONS

1. How long have you been coming to Jolly Giraffe sessions/activities?

.....

2. Have you heard of the Parents Forum?

a. If so, what do you know about it?

.....
.....
.....

b. If not, “the Parents Forum is made up of parents who give their views and suggestions to help Jolly Giraffe develop services which will meet the needs of the community.

3. What do you do if you have any comments or suggestions to make about the services/activities which Jolly Giraffe offers?

.....
.....
.....

4. Do you think you have any say or influence over what Jolly Giraffe does or the services it offers?

.....
.....
.....

5. Would you, now or in the future, be interested in being involved in the Forum? What (if anything) would encourage or enable you to do so?

.....
.....
.....