

**An evaluation of the parent and child
groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum
and commissioned by Sure Start Winsford**

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Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	i
Table of contents	ii
List of figures	iv
List of tables	v
Executive summary	vi
Chapter 1	Introduction
1.1	Background to the study 1
1.2	Parent and child groups 2
1.3	Aims of the study 3
Chapter 2	Methodology
2.1	Introduction 4
2.2	Process and outcome indicators of success 4
2.3	Qualitative data collection 5
2.3.1	Sampling 5
2.3.2	Semi-structured interviews 6
2.3.3	Observation using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (ECERS-R) 6
2.3.3.1	Adaptations to the ECERS-R to use with parent and toddler groups 7
2.4	Quantitative data collection 9
2.5	Research ethics 9
Chapter 3	Findings from the observation of sessions
3.1	Introduction 10
3.2	ECERS-R profile for the Ladybirds Club 10
3.3	ECERS-R profile for Ladybirds in Greenfields 13
3.4	ECERS-R profile for Library Ladybirds 15
3.5	ECERS-R profile for the Playtime Club 17
3.6	ECERS-R profile for the Friday Drop-In 19
3.7	Observation of the Parent and Baby Group 21
3.8	Conclusions from the observations 23
Chapter 4	Findings from the analysis of service activity data
4.1	Introduction 25
4.2	Ladybirds Club: service uptake by families 26
4.3	Ladybirds in Greenfields: service uptake by families 29
4.4	Library Ladybirds: service uptake by families 31
4.5	Playtime Club: service uptake by families 33
4.6	Friday Drop-In: service uptake by families 35
4.7	Parent and Baby Group: service uptake by families 37
4.8	Number of services overall used by individual families 39
4.9	Geographical reach of the parent and child groups 40

Chapter 5	The views and experiences of parents/carers who attend the parent and child groups	
5.1	Introduction	43
5.2	How did parents/carers find out about the Ladybirds Club and Ladybirds in Greenfields and what did they perceive to be the focus?	43
5.3	What did parents/carers like about the groups?	44
5.4	What did parents/carers think could be improved about the groups?	47
5.5	What were the outcomes for parents/carers of attending the groups?	49
5.6	What were the outcomes for children of attending the groups?	52
5.7	Conclusion	53
Chapter 6	Discussion	
6.1	Introduction	54
6.2	The experiences and views of parents/carers	54
6.3	The session facilitators	54
6.4	Reach of the service	55
6.5	Settings for the different groups	56
6.6	Conclusion	57
References		59
Appendices		
Appendix 1	Participant information sheets	60
Appendix 2	Interview schedules	61
Appendix 3	Adaptations to the ECERS-R	62
Appendix 4	Observation schedule for Parent and Baby Group	63

List of Figures

		Page
Figure 3.2.1	ECERS-R profile for the Ladybirds Club	11
Figure 3.3.1	ECERS-R profile for Ladybirds in Greenfields	13
Figure 3.4.1	ECERS-R profile for Library Ladybirds	15
Figure 3.5.1	ECERS-R profile for the Playtime Club	17
Figure 3.6.1	ECERS-R profile for the Friday Drop-In	19
Figure 4.2.1	Ladybirds Club – number of contacts per month	26
Figure 4.2.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Ladybirds Club during the 18 month period	27
Figure 4.2.3	Attendance figures for the 12-week Ladybirds Club programme (January 2006-May 2006)	28
Figure 4.3.1	Ladybirds in Greenfields – number of contacts per month	29
Figure 4.3.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with Ladybirds in Greenfields during the 18 month period	30
Figure 4.4.1	Library Ladybirds – number of contacts per month	31
Figure 4.4.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with Library Ladybirds during the 18 month period	31
Figure 4.5.1	Playtime Club – number of contacts per month	33
Figure 4.5.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Playtime Club during the 18 month period	33
Figure 4.6.1	Friday Drop-In– number of contacts per month	35
Figure 4.6.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Friday Drop-In during the 18 month period	35
Figure 4.7.1	Parent and Baby Group – number of contacts per month	37
Figure 4.7.2	Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Parent and Baby Group during the 18 month period	37
Figure 4.8.1	Number of services used by individual families	40
Figure 4.9.1	Parent and child groups service users by areas of deprivation in Cheshire (Super Output Area)	41
Figure 4.9.2	All service user contacts by areas of deprivation in Cheshire (Super Output Area)	42

List of Tables

		Page
Table 3.8.1	Summary of ECERS-R average subscale scores across all the settings	23
Table 4.8.1	Number of different families that accessed each service and the total number of contacts between September 2004 and February 2006	39

Executive summary

Introduction

Sure Start is a government policy initiative developed as a key part of its agenda to address child poverty and social exclusion. It aims to bring together early education, childcare, health and family support, in order to achieve better outcomes for children. Sure Start Winsford has commissioned Winsford Youth Forum to provide parent and child groups in the local area. At the time of this research there were six different groups in operation, each run weekly by the two session facilitators. The aim of the research was to evaluate the parent and child groups delivered by Winsford Youth Forum. It set out to evaluate the quality of the environment in the different settings and to explore the impact of the services on the children and families who use them.

Methods

The evaluation took a mainly qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with parents/carers who used the service and one of the service providers. Alongside this, the quality of the play environments in which the sessions were held was also examined, in order to assess the extent to which settings had been created in which positive outcomes for children were likely to be achieved. For this, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised Edition (ECERS-R) was used during observations of sessions (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005). This is a standardised instrument designed to measure quality in early childhood settings. The final aspect of the evaluation involved the analysis of quantitative data collected by Sure Start Winsford, which related to service uptake by local families.

Findings

Findings from observation of the different parent and child sessions, interviews with parents who use the service, and analysis of existing service activity data, provided an overall picture of the parent and child groups provided for Sure Start Winsford by Winsford Youth Forum. In combining the findings from each of these sources it was possible to identify key issues relating to the service, and to highlight the positive aspects as well as potential areas of improvement.

- **The experiences and views of parents/carers**

Parents/carers described several things they particularly liked about the groups. They considered the groups to be well-structured and organised, with a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. They liked the small groups, the way staff related to parents and children, and the healthy snacks. Children were said to really enjoy attending and especially enjoyed the craft and messy activities which were not always available at home.

Parents/carers interviewed identified positive outcomes of attending the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields, both for parents and for children. For parents, important outcomes included meeting other parents and sharing experiences, and avoiding social isolation. Other positive outcomes identified by parents/carers included increased confidence in their parenting skills, learning new ideas for

activities to do with children, and learning new ways of managing children's behaviour. This meant that parents/carers learnt new ways of interacting with and relating to their children that had the potential to be taken beyond the specific settings and transferred to the home environment.

A number of positive outcomes for children were described. The positive outcomes identified included increased confidence, development of social skills, improved behaviour, speech and language development, preparation for school, and a healthier diet.

- **The session facilitators**

The session facilitators were highlighted as a positive aspect of the service, through both the observation of sessions and interviews with parents. The staffing is consistent across all the groups and the two session facilitators were well established and known and trusted by families who use the service. Trust is an important factor in engaging families.

Interaction was identified as a strength of all the parent and child groups on the ECERS-R profiles. The session facilitators have developed positive relationships with the children and parents who attend. Interaction and cooperation between the two session facilitators was also consistently good.

However, the ECERS-R profile also revealed that the supervision and evaluation of staff was limited. There was some occasional informal observation of sessions by a manager but no formal structure in place to support staff development.

- **Reach of the service**

The service uptake data presented in this report relates to families who are registered with Sure Start Winsford, as this data, collected by the local programme, was the only data readily available. However, the actual number of families attending services may have been higher as all groups were open to non Sure Start Winsford families too. While appropriate for this report, with the move of Sure Start services into children's centres, the service monitoring arrangements will need to be reconsidered. As services will be available to all local families and no longer just families registered with Sure Start Winsford, the contact monitoring system will need to reflect this in order to capture data accurately on service uptake and usage.

The data presented in the report showed that a total of 138 different Sure Start Winsford registered families had accessed the six parent and child groups offered by Winsford Youth Forum during the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006. However, when these attendance figures were subjected to further analysis, it was revealed that for all of the groups, a substantial number of families had had between just one and five contacts with the service. As the data shows that the overall number of contacts with each service was high, the implication is that the services are being regularly used by a relatively small number of families. Given the overall number of families who had contact with the services, this could suggest that

the services are initially attracting a range of families but only retaining a small proportion of them.

The evaluation also raised the question of whether the Ladybirds Club, designed to offer intensive support to parents/carers who are struggling to cope with their child's behaviour, is actually reaching those families it is aimed at. Of the parents who attended the most recent Ladybirds Club (January to May 2006), many were already accessing the other parent and child groups available and some reported that they had done so for a number of years. Yet the Ladybirds Club is designed as a closed 12-week programme offered to parents/carers who have been identified as those who could benefit.

- **Settings for the different groups**

The observations of sessions, as well as comments from parents revealed that in some ways the settings, with the exception of Ladybirds in Greenfields which is held in a nursery setting, are not ideal for this type of group. As the parent and child groups do not have a permanent setting, the settings they use are also used by other community groups. The quality and appropriateness of space and furnishings reflected the various uses of the different settings and also meant that the equipment and settings are not always ideal for early childhood environments. As the groups do not have their own building from which to operate, they have little control over the furniture, equipment or resources available to them. Even at the Ladybirds in Greenfields group, as visitors in this setting, the group did not have access to an area to present child-related display, or any storage for their own materials.

A lack of outdoor space for children to play was also an issue in all of the settings except Greenfields Infant and Junior School. Those settings without access to outdoor space did not have any indoor space and equipment that could be used for gross motor play either, with the exception of Willow Wood Community Centre which focused on this area.

An additional issue related to the geographical setting of the groups. Some comments from parents/carers indicated that they would appreciate some additional groups local to them, rather than the majority of groups operating in the Wharton area of Winsford.

These issues are illustrative of arguments for and against using community venues as settings for parent and child groups. Although often it is not a purposeful choice, but rather one that is borne out of necessity, there are advantages to using community venues in that they can be more easily accessible for local families without transport and be familiar and so less threatening. However, related difficulties can stem from the fact that the venues were not designed specifically as early years settings, and are also shared with various other groups and used for different kinds of activities. These issues could, at least in part, be addressed with the move of Sure Start services into children's centres.

Conclusion

The parent and child groups provided by Sure Start Winsford are valued by the families who use them and positive outcomes were identified. A recent review of the quality of early learning, play and childcare services in Sure Start local programmes, conducted by the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) reported that parents valued services that allowed children opportunities to learn and for parents and children to enjoy activities together. For parents themselves it was important that services offered the opportunity for them to make friends which then encouraged them to move on and led to them developing their own support networks (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). The findings of this evaluation echo these messages.

The study by Anning, Chesworth & Spurling (2005) found that services were refocusing on promoting interactions between parents and children, and supporting the social and emotional development, and speech and language development of children. However, overall there was a lack of emphasis on promoting children's cognitive development (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). The findings from this evaluation support that general pattern of provision and focus of services.

In this evaluation, the skills of the session facilitators in gaining trust and building relationships with the families was identified as a particular strength of the service. This enabled session facilitators to offer advice about parenting and role model behaviour management techniques in a way that was acceptable to parents/carers. Anning, Chesworth & Spurling (2005) in their review of quality in early years services also reported that parents valued practitioners who could form positive relationships with families and provided advice about parenting in a non-stigmatised setting.

However, analysis of service uptake and usage revealed that a relatively small number of families generated a large proportion of the recorded contacts with the different groups. Also, it was identified that significant numbers of families had accessed the groups only a small number of times. Therefore, while the services are valued by the families that use them, the services are not having an impact for a large number of families, who may have a variety of needs, because they are not engaging with what is currently offered.

In many ways, Winsford Youth Forum had created good quality environments for the parent and child groups, as measured by the ECERS-R. However, there were some issues with the various settings used. While the setting of Greenfields Infant and Junior School, as a setting designed specifically as an early years environment, was highlighted by the ECERS-R profile, and comments from parents/carers, as a high-quality setting, other settings did have some disadvantages. These were related to the use of shared community venues as settings for early years services. Poor premises were highlighted as one of the possible threats to maintaining quality in early years settings (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005) as this meant that physical play, and outdoor play in particular were often limited. However, with the advent of new children's centres providing purpose built facilities, these difficulties may be overcome.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Sure Start is a government policy initiative developed as a key part of its agenda to address child poverty and social exclusion. It aims to bring together early education, childcare, health and family support, in order to achieve better outcomes for children and families by:

- increasing the availability of childcare for all children;
- improving health and emotional development for young children;
- supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment.

(Sure Start, 2006).

Sure Start local programmes have been established in neighbourhoods with high levels of socio-economic deprivation. These local programmes are delivered by local partnerships which aim to work with both statutory and voluntary service providers in the areas of family support, childcare, health and early learning. Sure Start local programmes aim to work in innovative ways, in an effort to improve services and provide better access to them.

Sure Start Winsford is a Sixth Round programme, established in 2003. Winsford is located within the borough of Vale Royal, in central Cheshire. There are two clusters served by Sure Start Winsford, meaning that it is a split site. The two geographical areas are 'Over Two and Grange' and 'Wharton and Gravel', which includes Rilshaw Lane Travellers Caravan Park. Winsford is a very diverse area as it contains some of the most affluent as well as the most deprived areas of Cheshire. One of its wards, Winsford Over, was ranked 3rd in the Index of Multiple Deprivation of Cheshire wards in 2004 and was ranked in the top 5% of most deprived areas in England (Cheshire County Council, 2004). At the time of this report there were over 700 eligible families within the areas served by Sure Start Winsford.

Sure Start Winsford has commissioned Winsford Youth Forum to provide parent and child groups in the local area. The parent and child groups run by Winsford Youth Forum were first introduced in 1999, with a Parent and Baby Group, followed by the Ladybirds Club. Between 1999 and 2003, four other parent and child groups were introduced. Development of the groups was based on the following identified needs:

- no play facilities for children between the ages of nought to five;
- a lack of parenting support;
- a need for positive parenting models;
- a need for support with speech and language;
- evidence of low self-esteem and maternal confidence.

(Winsford Youth Forum, 2005).

At the time of this research, under Sure Start Winsford funding, the parent and child groups are delivered by two session facilitators. There are currently six different

groups in operation, each running a weekly session. These are described below. The Parent and Baby Group is aimed at parents with babies from nought to 15 months old. This group acts as a feeder for the other groups, once children reach the age of 15 months. The other groups are aimed at parents with children aged between 15 months and five years old although younger siblings are also allowed to attend the groups.

Parent and Baby Group

This is a group for parents with babies up to the age of 15 months. It offers parents the chance to meet other parents, with the aim of preventing social isolation, increasing parents' confidence and building self-esteem.

Ladybirds Club

This is a closed group to which fifteen parents and their children are invited. The group has weekly sessions over a twelve week period. The group focuses on learning through play.

Ladybirds in Greenfields

This is based on the Ladybirds Club but is held in a different area of Winsford. However, this is not a closed session.

Playtime Club

This group aims to promote a positive approach to physical play, in order to develop children's gross motor skills. The group encourages parents to play with their children. It also aims to support children to develop their social skills.

Library Ladybirds

This session is held at a local library, with a member of library staff who works closely with the session facilitators. Stories and music time activities are shared with the children and their parents. The session aims to support the development of children's concentration and listening skills.

Friday Drop-In

This is a traditional parent and child group, open to parents with children between the ages nought to four. Parents can access support and advice and also have the opportunity to socialise with other parents.

1.2 Parent and Child groups

While there has been much research into the benefits of children's play, there has been very little research into shared play experiences such as those promoted through parent and child groups (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). Furthermore, informal settings such as parent and child groups have not traditionally been exposed to requirements or systems of quality assurance (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). Therefore, evaluating quality in this setting is far from straightforward.

This is part of a wider debate about quality in early childhood settings, which has received an increasing amount of attention but little in-depth systematic research. There has been increasing concern about how quality in these services is defined, underpinned by whether 'quality' is "understood as objective and static or subjective and dynamic" (Tanner, Welsh & Lewis, 2006, p. 4). An objective understanding of quality is reflected in UK policy documents and may also be indicative of concerns about the definition and measurement of key aspects of public services (Tanner, Welsh & Lewis, 2006). By contrast, an understanding of quality in early childhood settings as a subjective concept would expect definitions of quality to vary and change over time as "definitions of quality reflect the values and beliefs, needs and agendas, influence and empowerment of various 'stakeholder' groups having an interest in these services" (Moss, 1994, p.1).

Anning, Chesworth & Spurling (2005) argue that although quality is difficult to assess, there are principles guiding what are considered to be good quality early childhood services, as described below:

The bottom line in defining quality are features of provision that are beneficial to young children (in terms of child development) and their families (in terms of accessibility, affordability and general well-being). So the nature of adult/child relationships is central to good quality childcare settings. (p. 34).

1.3 Aims of the study

The aim of the research was to evaluate the parent and child groups delivered by Winsford Youth Forum. It set out to explore the impact of the services on the children and families who use them. As part of this it was necessary to clarify and define the intended outcomes of the services with the service providers. The evaluation also examined the extent to which the groups were underpinned by Sure Start aims and principles.

The specific objectives of the evaluation were to:

- describe the different settings and services offered;
- analyse available monitoring data about service uptake;
- identify how participants are recruited to, and retained within, the service(s) and how these processes might be improved;
- examine whether the parent and child groups were addressing Sure Start aims and were underpinned by Sure Start principles;
- investigate whether settings were being created in which positive outcomes for children were likely to be achieved;
- explore the perceived benefits of the service and any areas for improvement;
- explore the outcomes of attending the service from the perspectives of service providers and service users.

Chapter 2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The evaluation investigated both processes and outcomes of the parent and child groups. Process evaluation explores how the service is organised and delivered and includes the collection of output data that relate to the service activities (Bowling, 2002). It is important to understand what actually happens in a service, as an awareness of the nature of what is being evaluated provides a more solid basis for the evaluation of outcomes (Robson, 1993). It can also help with understanding why outcomes may not be achieved. Outcomes of a service refer to how effective the service has been in achieving its intended aims (Bowling, 2002). It can be difficult to measure outcomes from services such as those provided by Winsford Youth Forum. In part this is because often managers and practitioners do not have mechanisms in place for measuring the impact of their services on children and families (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). Also, outcomes may not have been clearly defined by the service provider, and, equally, some outcomes may be difficult to measure. Furthermore, some outcomes may only become obvious in the longer term. In order to explore both process and outcome, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used in the evaluation.

2.2 Process and outcome indicators of success

Following consultation with the service providers the following process and outcome indicators of success were developed for the evaluation of the parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum.

The process indicators of success used in the evaluation were:

- range of activities and the nature of service delivery reported and observed;
- the perceptions of service providers and service users as to the nature of the intervention and their experiences of it;
- clearly defined intended service outcomes;
- attendance figures;
- patterns of attendance (for example, one-off session or ongoing support, service reach);
- description of the referral pathway;
- reasons for referral;
- source of referral;
- patterns of attendance.

For outcome indicators of success, the evaluation relied upon exploring outcomes as reported by service users and service providers. This was because no outcomes are measured by the service providers and also some of the intended aims and outcomes of the service were difficult to measure in any other way. The evaluation looked at outcomes at two levels, the level of the individual and the level of the environment. Therefore, the outcomes of attending the groups for children and

parents/carers were examined. Alongside this, the quality of the play environments in which the sessions were held was also examined, in order to assess the extent to which settings had been created in which positive outcomes for children were likely to be achieved. The outcome indicators of success used in the evaluation were:

- benefits of the service and any suggestions for improvement as reported by service users;
- service users' understanding of their experiences of using the service and what the outcomes have been for them;
- service providers' reports of outcomes for service users;
- the quality of the environment.

2.3 Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data collection methods, namely observation and interviews, were used to collect evidence of both process and outcome indicators of success. Process indicators of success included comments from service users and service providers about their experiences in relation to the implementation and delivery of the service. Qualitative outcome indicators included the perceptions of service users and service providers as to the impact the service has had. Observation was used in all of the different child and family groups. A more in-depth exploration of service benefits and outcomes was conducted in the Ladybirds Club, using in-depth interviews with service users, as it was anticipated that the objectives and outcomes were likely to be clearer in this focused, time-limited, and more structured service.

2.3.1 Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used. This is a deliberately non-random method of selecting participants for research, which allows individuals to be selected because they have knowledge relevant to the research (Bowling, 2002). Therefore the sample included lead stakeholders, namely the service providers, parents and children who use the services.

A formal observation was conducted during one session of each of the six different parent and child groups, in order to provide a complete picture of the facilities used and activities offered.

The researcher also attended further sessions at the Ladybirds Club and Ladybirds in Greenfields as these sessions were the focus of a more in-depth study into outcomes of attending for parents/carers and their children. This involved attending two sessions of the Ladybirds Club and one session at Ladybirds in Greenfields. Access to service users for interview was arranged through service providers during these sessions. One parent who had previously attended the Ladybirds Club was interviewed while attending a different parent and child group. One of the two session facilitators was also interviewed. Service users and service providers were provided with written information about the study prior to the interview (see Appendix 1 for copies of the participant information sheets) and the informed consent of participants

was obtained. In total, in-depth interviews were conducted with one of the two service providers and 11 service users.

2.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted with service users who were currently accessing or had previously accessed the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields, and one of the service providers. Interviews are a useful data collection method for enabling respondents to give detailed responses about complex issues, without requiring particular literacy skills (Bowling, 2002). In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has a list of issues and questions to be discussed but has some flexibility in the order of topics covered and can allow the interviewee to elaborate on the issues raised (Denscombe, 1998). The interview schedules developed and used in the evaluation are presented in Appendix 2 Areas covered during the interviews included how service users had come to access the parent and child groups, what their perceptions and experiences of attending had been, what they perceived as benefits of the groups, any suggestions for improvement, and what they perceived to be the outcomes of attending the groups, both for themselves, and for their child. The session facilitator was asked about the aims and focus of the different parent and child groups, how families come to access the groups, and what the perceived outcomes of attending the groups are.

With the permission of the interviewee, interviews were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were then analysed thematically and interrogated for information.

2.3.3 Observation using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (ECERS-R)

Observation is ‘a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place (Kumar, 1996, p.105) useful for exploring interaction within a group or situations when it is difficult to elicit particular information by questioning those participating. Direct observation is a technique whereby researchers collect data directly from their own observations of participants rather than by an indirect method, such as a questionnaire or test, and is particularly useful for exploring children’s behaviour (Rolfe, 2001). Observation of the parent and toddler groups enabled the experiences of the children attending to be explored. Indeed, Ball (2002) argues that young children are not able to contribute a great deal verbally to the evaluation of services, although conclusions can be drawn from observations of their behaviour.

Observation of parent and child sessions also allowed the activities to be described in detail. A standardised instrument designed to measure quality in early childhood settings, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised Edition (ECERS-R) was used during observations (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005).

The ECERS-R has been designed to measure quality in early childhood environments, such as pre-school, kindergarten and childcare settings. It is designed

to evaluate environments serving children between two and a half and five years of age.

The ECERS-R consists of a total of 43 items against which the setting under observation is measured. The items are organised into seven subscales which explore different aspects of the early childhood environment. These are Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005).

Items are scored on a 7-point scale. The value of scores are described as inadequate (score of 1), minimal (score of 3), good (score of 5) and excellent (score of 7). An average score is then calculated for each subscale and so a profile for the environment under study is generated.

2.3.3.1 Adaptations to the ECERS-R to use with parent and toddler groups

The ECERS-R has been designed for use in pre-school, kindergarten, and childcare classrooms (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005). Parent and child groups can differ from these in certain ways such as providing sessions which may be shorter in duration and less frequent. A major difference is that parents are present in these settings whereas they would be unlikely to be present in day care or early education settings. However, in operating parent and child groups, service providers should still aim to provide a high quality early childhood environment. There is not a more appropriate tool available at this moment in time that can be used to measure quality specifically in parent and child groups. The ECERS-R is considered to be a well respected and widely used measure of quality in early childhood environments (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). With some adaptations it has been used to assess the quality of parent and child settings (Martinez, Hannon, Van Dijk & Fitter, 2001).

In deciding to use the ECERS-R to measure the quality of the settings in this evaluation, some adaptation to the scale was considered necessary in order to make the tool more appropriate for parent and child groups. An overview of the subscales and items of the ECERS-R is presented in Appendix 3 This indicates which items were used in each of the observations. The adaptation process and relevant issues are described below.

Item inclusion/ exclusion criteria

Before the observations, two researchers trialled the ECERS-R on two occasions in two separate settings. These were both parent and child groups provided by another Sure Start local programme, held within community settings, and so were similar to the groups at Sure Start Winsford. Following this, the researchers met to discuss the appropriateness of the various items for this type of setting. It was decided to exclude those items considered not relevant to parent and toddler groups. For example, items 9, 11 and 12 relate to day care settings in which children attend without their parents and may be attending for the entire day, as they refer to toileting and napping routines and provision. The remaining items were then considered and sorted into two groups, namely items considered 'always relevant' for this type of setting and

those which are 'sometimes relevant', depending upon the focus of the particular setting. This resulted in 18 items being used as standard for each observation. Prior to each observation, the aims and focus of the session were considered and items from the 'sometimes relevant' category were added if considered relevant and appropriate. In this way, the decision to include or exclude particular items was taken by considering the importance of that item for a parent and toddler group situation, as well as the focus and aims of the particular session. Importantly, this process of excluding inappropriate or irrelevant criteria was conducted before the observation took place. Items were only excluded if there was a valid reason for doing so

Length of time observed and scored

Guidelines for the ECERS-R use "a substantial portion of the day" to measure whether various activities or materials were accessible to children. "A substantial portion of the day" is defined as "at least one third of the time the children are in attendance" (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005, p. 7). Examples are given of a nine hour programme and a three hour programme and the time periods worked out accordingly. Furthermore, scoring guidelines specify that "scores should be based on the current situation that is observed or reported by staff ... in the absence of observable information on which to base your rating, you may use answers given by staff during the question period to assign scores" (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005, p. 5).

However, the Sure Start Winsford parent and child groups are run for just two hours each once a week. The activities are planned over a longer period of time, such as the twelve-week period during which the Ladybirds Club is run. Therefore, some activities not observed during the session may take place at a different session during the course. With this in mind, the planning sheets for the Ladybirds Club twelve-week programme were studied and the session was scored accordingly. These activities were also provided at Ladybirds in Greenfields, as the same planning sheets were followed in that setting. The Library Ladybirds planning sheet for the term was also studied. No planning sheets are kept for the Playtime Club, the Parent and Baby Group, or the Friday Drop-In, so staff were questioned about the different parent and child groups, in order to provide an overview of the materials and activities accessible to children. These responses were also considered in scoring the items.

Attendance of parents

One of the main aims of the parent and child groups at Sure Start Winsford is to encourage and support parents to interact positively and to play with their children. Therefore the emphasis is on facilitating parents to do this, and so items in Section III Language-Reasoning and Section V Interaction, were considered to apply also to parents rather than just staff, as an aim of the session was to encourage parents to do these activities with their children.

Parent and Baby Group

This is a group for parents with babies aged nought to 15 months old. Given the age of the children attending this group, the ECERS-R was not an appropriate tool as it focuses on measuring the quality of environments for children aged between two and a half and five years old. Therefore observation of this session was completed using an observation schedule (presented in Appendix 4) designed to describe the setting, resources and structure of the session.

Friday Drop-In

This session has a focus on providing support for parents, and so the staff are available for parents to talk to. The emphasis is on social skills and interaction rather than learning. Therefore the activities section of the ECERS-R profile was removed for this setting, while interaction and language-reasoning items were left in.

2.4 Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data was also extracted for the evaluation in order to explore service outputs, such as the numbers of people using the services. Such monitoring data is routinely collected by Sure Start Winsford and is entered onto the MCA database. Data from the MCA database relating to service access and usage was analysed to provide indicators of the reach of the services, such as the number of parents/carers and children who had used the services. The geographical location of these families was plotted onto a map of Winsford, using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a computer software package, in order to provide a further indicator of service reach. The data from the MCA database was anonymised.

2.5 Research ethics

The Centre for Public Health Research received ethics approval for the evaluation of Sure Start Winsford from both the South Cheshire Local Research Ethics Committee (in September 2004) and Central Cheshire Primary Care Trust (in April 2004).

Chapter 3

Findings from the observation of sessions

3.1 Introduction

There were six different parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum, each running a weekly session. These are described below. The results of the assessment of quality in each setting, using the ECERS-R, are then presented.

The ECERS-R tool and related issues are described in detail in Chapter 2. In brief, the ECERS-R consists of 43 items organised into seven subscales which explore different aspects of the early childhood environment, against which the setting under observation is measured. The seven subscales are Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff. Items are scored on a 7-point scale. The value of scores are described as inadequate (score of 1), minimal (score of 3), good (score of 5) and excellent (score of 7). An average score is then calculated for each subscale and so a profile for the environment under study is constructed.

The ECERS-R profile is presented for each setting. Following this, a summary of the key issues that influenced the profile scores in each section is provided. The exception is the Parent and Baby Group. Given the age of the children attending this group, the ECERS-R was not an appropriate tool as this focuses on environments for children aged between two and a half and five years old. Therefore observation of this session was completed using an observation schedule (presented in Appendix 4).

3.2 ECERS-R profile for the Ladybirds Club

This is a closed group to which twelve parents and their children are invited. The group has weekly sessions over a twelve week period. The sessions are held on Thursday mornings, at Wharton Youth Centre. The group focuses on learning through play. Sessions are planned in advance with activities that aim to address different areas of a child's development. For each session the planning includes a creative activity, a play pit/ sensory play activity, a speech and language development idea or activity, an idea or activity related to supporting parents/carers to play with their child, and an activity for families to try at home.

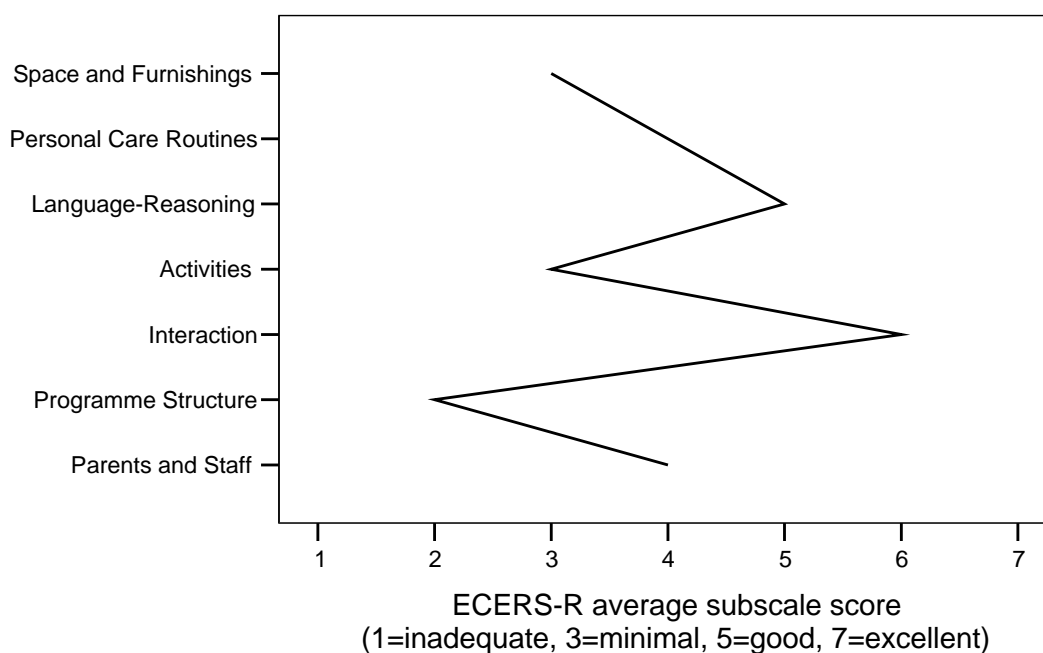
The session facilitators reported that they have worked closely with the speech and language therapist at Sure Start Winsford, who previously attended the sessions every two weeks. The speech and language therapist developed a set of 'top tips' for parents regarding children's speech and language development. These are given out to parents each week and suggest activities for parents to do with their children.

The ultimate aim of the Ladybirds Clubs is to help prepare each child to be confident in the wider world. The specific objectives of the group are to:

- provide a safe and happy environment for adult and child;

- develop a positive approach to play and learning;
- encourage the expression of personality in an acceptable and reasonable manner;
- develop everyone's self-confidence and self-esteem;
- provide a place of fun and friendship where children can learn through play.

Figure 3.2.1 ECERS-R profile for the Ladybirds Club



Space and Furnishings

- Scores were very wide ranging for different items within this section.
- The furniture and space in this setting was sufficient for the number of parents and children present. However, the number attending was small so the space may not be sufficient with larger numbers.
- The lack of open shelves for children's toys was a weakness for this setting. This could be a reflection of the fact that the space is used for different groups and so the toys have to be stored away in boxes inside the cupboard.
- There was no indoor or outdoor space for children to use for gross motor play. This was a weakness of the setting.

Personal Care Routines

- A well-balanced snack was provided for children. The session emphasised healthy eating and so a range of fruit is provided.
- Health practices for this session scored in the 'good' range.
- Staff anticipated and acted to prevent safety problems.

Language-Reasoning

- The average score for items in this section was in the 'good' range.
- A particular strength was the way the staff encouraged the use of language informally, through individual conversations with children and by encouraging children to expand their responses.

Activities

- Limited nature/science and maths equipment and activities contributed to a relatively low score for this section.
- Art, music/movement, sand/water and dramatic play all scored more highly. However, these scores could be further improved by increasing the range of equipment and activities available in each of these areas.

Interaction

- The Ladybirds Club received its highest score in this section, with an average subscale score falling between the 'good' and 'excellent' categories.
- Particular strengths in this section were the general supervision of children, as well as the quality of staff-child interactions.

Programme Structure

- The Ladybirds Club received its lowest score for this section. This score was mainly a result of the lack of outdoor space for children to use for play.
- The mix of individual and group activities throughout the session was a relative strength.

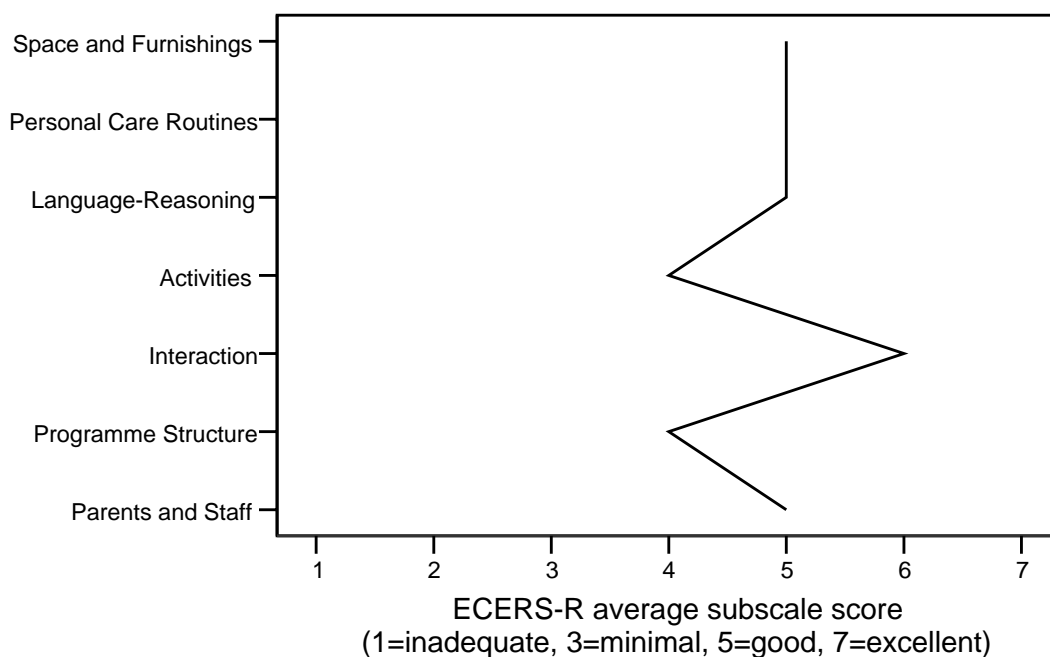
Parents and Staff

- Interaction and cooperation between the staff was a strength.
- The supervision and evaluation of staff was a relative weakness as opportunities for these activities were found to be limited.

3.3 ECERS-R profile for Ladybirds in Greenfields

This is based on the Ladybirds Club but is held in a different area of Winsford. Sessions take place Thursday afternoons, at Greenfields Infant and Junior School. However, although the activities are based on those of the Ladybirds Club, it differs in that it is not a closed session and so attendance is not by invitation only. This setting is the permanent location of a nursery class, held on weekday mornings. The Ladybirds in Greenfields group are able to use most of the equipment and materials available to the nursery.

Figure 3.3.1 ECERS-R profile for Ladybirds in Greenfields



Space and Furnishings

- The indoor space, furniture, room arrangement and gross motor equipment, all scored very highly in this setting. This could reflect the fact that the setting is used daily as a nursery and is furnished, arranged and equipped as such.
- The factors that prevented this setting scoring even more highly in this section included the lack of soft furnishings and child-related display. There was a cosy reading area present but this was closed off from the group because of previous complaints about children from this group damaging books belonging to the nursery. There was also a great deal of appropriate child-related display but none of this related to the Ladybirds in Greenfields group, rather it reflected the nursery children and their activities.

Personal Care Routines

- A healthy snack was provided for children.
- Safety practices were a strength, the play areas were arranged to avoid safety problems and staff explained the reasons for safety rules to children.

Language-Reasoning

- As mentioned, the reading area was blocked off during the session and so children's access to books was limited.
- There were activities and materials available to encourage children to communicate.
- A further strength was the way that staff worked to develop children's language informally.

Activities

- The provision for sand play, water play and dramatic play, with a well equipped role play area, were strengths of this setting.
- Nature/science activities were limited.
- Although resources were available for block play and maths/number activities, increasing the range of materials available would allow this setting to score more highly in this section.

Interaction

- All scores in this section were in the 'good' to 'excellent' range.
- The general supervision of children and staff-child interactions were particular strengths.

Programme Structure

- This setting scored higher in this section than any of the other settings. This was due to the availability of outdoor space for children to use to play. The outdoor play area was well equipped and various toys and equipment were available for children to use outside.

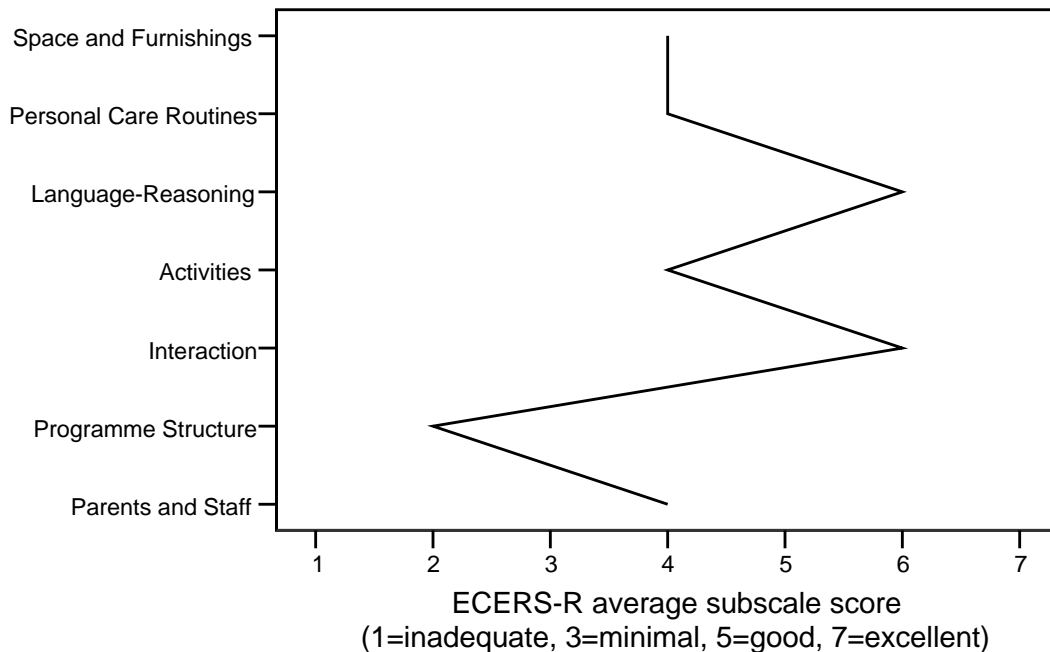
Parents and Staff

- Staff interaction and cooperation were a strength. One member of staff was absent but a replacement was provided by Winsford Youth Forum. The replacement worked under the direction of the session facilitator so each had clearly defined roles.

3.4 ECERS-R profile for Library Ladybirds

This session is held at Wharton Library, on Tuesday mornings. A member of library staff works closely with the two session facilitators to help run the session. Stories and music time activities are shared with the children and their parents. The session aims to focus on the development of children's concentration and listening skills.

Figure 3.4.1 ECERS-R profile for Library Ladybirds



Space and Furnishings

- The soft furnishings in this setting were a positive aspect. A small couch, various soft chairs, cushions and soft toys were available for children to use.
- There was sufficient space to allow the children and adults to move about comfortably.
- This setting lacked some furniture for routine care. There was only one changing mat and this was stored on the bathroom floor as there was no available surface to use for changing nappies.

Personal Care Routines

- Staff reinforced the need for children to wash their hands before snack time.
- There was a child safety gate on the door to the kitchen as this room is accessed directly from the library. This gate was mistakenly left open for a short period of time during the observation. The kitchen is used by staff to prepare the food and drinks for snack time.

Language-Reasoning

- Overall this setting scored highly in this section with an average subscale score between 'good' and 'excellent'.

-
- As this session is held in a library, there was a large and varied selection of books appropriate for the age range of the children, so that was a strength of this section.
 - The informal use of language and evidence of staff encouraging children to communicate were also strengths.

Activities

- Music/movement was a positive aspect of this setting. Several music materials were available to children and various types of music are used with the children.
- While there was an art activity each session in this setting, there would need to be a larger range of art materials available to children and more individual expression in order to gain a higher score. In this session staff have to bring all the art materials to the library with them for use.

Interaction

- Interaction was a very positive aspect of this session as all scores were in the range between 'good' and 'excellent'.
- General supervision of children and staff-child interactions were particular strengths.
- Although the focus is on children and parents spending time together, interaction among children were also good.

Programme Structure

- Children did not have access to outdoor space in this setting, which had a negative influence on scores for this section.
- There was an appropriate balance of whole group and individual activities for the age of the children present.

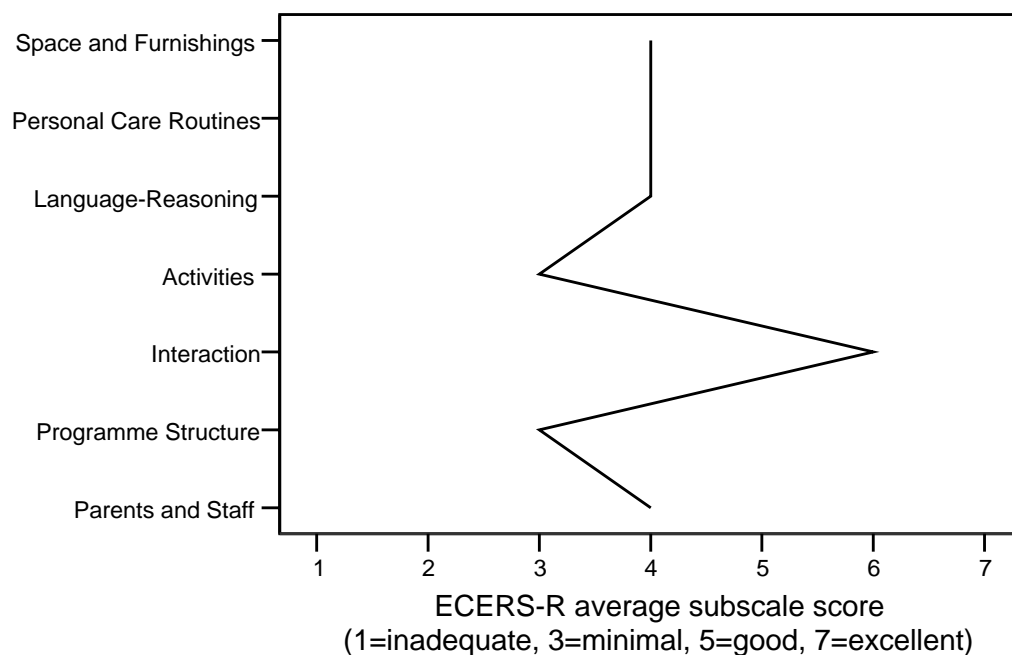
Parents and Staff

- Staff interaction and cooperation were strengths. The input to the session from the librarian was positive and all the staff worked well together, with activities handled smoothly.

3.5 ECERS-R profile for the Playtime Club

This session takes place at Willow Wood Community Centre in Wharton, on Wednesday mornings. This group aims to promote a positive approach to physical play, in order to develop children's gross motor skills. The group encourages parents to play with their children. It also aims to support children to develop their social skills. This is also the main group for inviting in visitors, such as an oral hygienist or members of the fire brigade, to provide parents with information.

Figure 3.5.1 ECERS-R profile for the Playtime Club



Space and Furnishings

- The ample space for children and adults to move around in was a strength in this setting. This was true even though there were large numbers of children and adults present at the session, more so than in any of the other sessions observed.
- This setting also scored highly on the range and quality of the gross motor equipment available for children to use.
- Factors which lowered the overall score in this section included the lack of child-sized tables and chairs and the lack of child-related display.

Personal Care Routines

- A healthy snack for children was provided.
- Health practices were good, with staff acting to cut down on the spread of germs.
- There were some minor safety hazards in this setting, such as heavy swing doors not blocked off from children. Also rows of chairs were used to separate different areas in the hall but some of the children tried to climb over these.

Language-Reasoning

- There were several staff-child conversations during free play and routines.
- Language was primarily used positively by staff to exchange information with children and for social interaction, rather than for controlling behaviour and managing routines.

Activities

- As this session focused on physical play and the development of gross motor skills, most of the questions in this section relating to activities in different areas would not be relevant. Therefore just the indicator about promoting acceptance of diversity was scored for this section. There was one example of racial and cultural diversity visible in materials.

Interaction

- All scores in this section fell between the 'good' and 'excellent' categories.
- Staff-child interactions were a particular strength.
- Parents actively encouraged children to develop appropriate social behaviour with peers, such as sharing equipment and taking turns.

Programme Structure

- This setting scored more highly in this section than some of the other settings because of the facilities and equipment to allow gross motor play.
- The lack of an outdoor space for play in this setting influenced the overall score in this section.

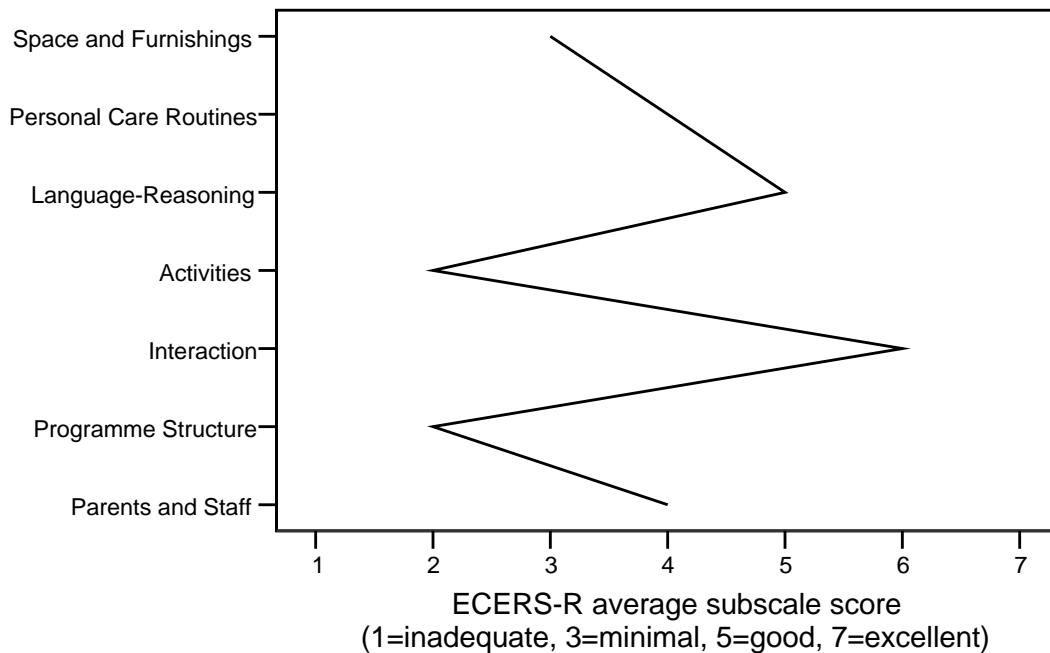
Parents and Staff

- The interaction and cooperation between staff was a strength.
- As applies to all settings studied, the supervision and evaluation of staff was found to be limited.

3.6 ECERS-R profile for the Friday Drop-In

This is a traditional parent and child group, open to parents with children between the ages nought to four. It is held at Wharton Youth Centre on Friday mornings. Parents can access support and advice and also have the opportunity to socialise with other parents. On the day of the observation this session was well attended by parents and children.

Figure 3.6.1 ECERS-R profile for the Friday Drop-In



Space and Furnishings

- The indoor space and the soft furnishings for children's use scored highly in this setting.
- The lack of an outdoor space for children to play was a limitation in this setting.
- The limited indoor space in this setting meant that there were no opportunities for gross motor play.

Personal Care Routines

- Health practices were good, as staff maintained sanitary conditions.
- Staff acted to prevent safety problems.

Language-Reasoning

- Overall this setting scored well in this section with an average subscale score of 'good'.
- Encouraging the use of language informally was a particular strength.

-
- Activities and materials to encourage children to communicate were utilised by staff. Staff balanced listening and talking appropriately during these activities, according to the age and ability of the children.

Activities

- This session appeared to have a focus on allowing parents to interact with each other rather than a focus on the different activities available for children.
- As space is limited, staff waited until parents and children arrived to lay out extra activities. This was because they then knew how much free space was available and also the age range of the children present, which allowed them to choose appropriate activities.
- As a consequence of both these points, this setting received relatively low scores in this section, as the range of activities for children was limited.

Interaction

- Scores in this section were high with an average subscale score in the 'good' to 'excellent' range.
- The general supervision of children was a particular strength. Supervision of children was adjusted appropriately for the differing ages and abilities of the children present. Staff demonstrated an appreciation of children's efforts and achievements.
- Staff-child interactions also scored highly, with staff appearing to enjoy being with the children.

Programme Structure

- In common with some of the other settings the lack of outdoor space for children to play in resulted in a relatively low score for this section.
- The structure of the session allowed for an appropriate mix of individual and group activities.

Parents and Staff

- The overall score in this section, in common with that in other settings, was limited by the lack of supervision and evaluation of staff. This issue would need to be addressed at an organisational level in order for the setting to score more highly in this area.
- Staff interaction and cooperation was good, with responsibilities shared and mutual support evident.

3.7 Observation of Parent and Baby Group

This session is held at Wharton Youth Centre on Monday mornings. This is a group for parents with babies up to the age of 15 months. It offers parents the chance to meet other parents, with the aim of preventing social isolation, increasing parents' confidence and building self-esteem. This group acts as a feeder for the other groups as once children reach the age of 15 months the session facilitators provide parents with information about the other groups available.

Setting

This setting consists of two large rooms, a kitchen, an office, and toilets. One room was set out with a circle of eight adult sized comfy chairs with cushions. In the centre of the circle were several baby toys. The other room had three child-sized tables and chairs, used at snack time, and several comfortable adult-sized chairs, placed in a semi-circle shape. In this area there was also a baby changing mat placed on a stand, ready for use.

Resources

The baby toys were all in good condition. There was a wide selection for children to choose from, including a baby activity mat, soft toys, toys to practise manipulative skills, push and pull toys. Toys that were available were bright and stimulating and were in a range of materials and textures. There were enough chairs for everyone attending the group to use. A dolls house, an activity mat and a selection of books were also available. A display board decorated with photographs and information about the different parent and child groups available was set up in the room. Resources were available to suit the ages of the children attending, which is not known until the children arrive. Therefore, when an older child arrived, a box of building blocks was brought out for the child to use.

Structure of the session

The first hour was dedicated to free play. This part of the session seemed very casual and relaxed, with parents sitting down or getting up and moving between the two rooms as they wished. This session provided parents with an opportunity to talk to other parents. Most parents at the session seemed already to know each other, calling other parents and their children by their names. There was a lot of general chat between parents during the session, as well as sharing experiences and ideas relating to children, resources, and activities. While parents did tend to watch their children and intervened if children requested, or were misbehaving, the focus seemed to be more on parents talking to other parents, rather than on doing activities with their child. The session facilitator asked the group to help tidy up in preparation for snack time, having given the children and adults advance warning that they would soon need to stop their activities. Parents all helped to put the toys away and encouraged their children to help also.

Following this, the children were seated at the tables in the other room, for snack time. Usually the children are given healthy snacks, including fruit and vegetables but on the day of the observation, as it was the final session before Easter, the children

had party food, such as cakes, crisps, biscuits and sausages. They were given milk to drink, with training cups available for toddlers who needed them. The children seemed used to the routine and settled at the tables. Parents stayed close to their children, helping them to eat. Parents also continued to have discussions with each other, relating for example, to children's diets and healthy food allowances.

After snack time, which lasted for half an hour, the parents and children moved back into the other room for song time. The parents and session facilitator sit on chairs in a circle, with their children on their laps. The group sung several songs together, along with performing the actions. The group then stood and completed some marching songs with the children. This part of the session lasted approximately 15 minutes, after which the session ended. Children were each given a gift for Easter as they left.

Staff

One member of staff was absent so the group was run by the remaining member of staff. A supervisor from the college where the member of staff is currently studying was also present. The session facilitator spread her time between talking to parents about general issues and playing with the children. With children, the session facilitator modelled some behaviour management techniques, such as talking firmly to children but without raising her voice, and explaining to children the reasons they were not allowed to play with a particular toy. Children and adults all seemed at ease with the session facilitator, who was friendly and approachable.

Clients

Six parents/carers attended the group, with a total of eight children. Of these children, four were babies, three were toddlers and one was an older child (pre-school age).

3.8 Conclusions from the observations

A summary of all ECERS-R average subscale scores across of the settings is presented in Table 3.8.1. The key issues and influencing factors are then discussed.

Table 3.8.1 Summary of ECERS-R average subscale scores across all the settings

	Ladybirds Club	Ladybirds in Greenfields	Library Ladybirds	Playtime Club	Friday-Drop-In
Space and Furnishings	3	5	4	4	3
Personal Care Routines	4	5	4	4	4
Language-Reasoning	5	5	6	4	5
Activities	3	4	4	3	2
Interaction	6	6	6	6	6
Programme Structure	2	4	2	3	2
Parents and Staff	4	5	4	4	4

Key to scores: 1=inadequate, 3=minimal, 5=good, 7=excellent

- Interaction was a strength of all the parent and child groups. Established staff have developed positive relationships with the children and parents who attend. The staff evidently enjoyed being with the children and model and encourage a mutual respect between children and adults.
- Staff interaction and cooperation was also consistently good. Staff communicate well with each other and share responsibilities so that the sessions run smoothly.
- A basic schedule exists in each session that is familiar to the children and parents. Children learn the routines and parents can become involved, for example in helping to prepare for snack time.
- Staff encourage and promote a healthy diet by providing healthy snacks. The snack differs from session to session and so a wide range of fruit and vegetables are presented. The use of sugary drinks at the session is discouraged by staff.
- The quality and appropriateness of space and furnishings reflected the various uses of the different settings. As the parent and child groups do not have a permanent setting, settings they use are also used by other

community groups. This means that the equipment and settings are not always ideal for early childhood environments. Greenfields Infant and Junior School was an exception as this has been developed purposefully as an early childhood environment. Even so, as visitors in this setting, the Ladybirds in Greenfields were still limited in some ways. For example, the group did not have access to an area to present child-related display, or any storage for their own materials.

- A related issue was the sometimes limited range of materials available for children to use. Settings may have scored more highly had a larger range of materials been available. This could be due to funding issues, as well as the practical issue of space and storage.
- The range of activities and materials used to promote the acceptance of diversity was limited. This was an issue common to all the settings observed.
- A lack of outdoor space for children to play was an issue in all of the settings except Greenfields Infant and Junior School. Those settings without access to outdoor space did not have any indoor space and equipment that could be used for gross motor play either, with the exception of Willow Wood Community Centre.
- Supervision and evaluation of staff was found to be limited. There was some occasional informal observation but no formal structure in place to support staff.

Chapter 4

Findings from the analysis of service activity data

4.1 Introduction

Service uptake and usage data routinely collected by Sure Start Winsford was analysed. It should be noted that this data relates only to families who are registered with Sure Start Winsford, a requirement of the local programme. The parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum for Sure Start Winsford are however open to all local families, so the total number of families who attended the groups may have been higher.

In the following sections, the number of contacts with parents and with children that each service has had during the 18 month period from September 2004 to February 2006 inclusive are presented. The number of contacts per month with children and adults is shown. As the number of contacts are grouped by month, there may have been more than one contact with any parent/carer and their child or children during that month. For that reason, the number of contacts which individual families had with each service is then explored. Before the data could be analysed a comprehensive data cleaning process was required for accuracy because there were found to be many duplicate entries in the data received from the local programme.

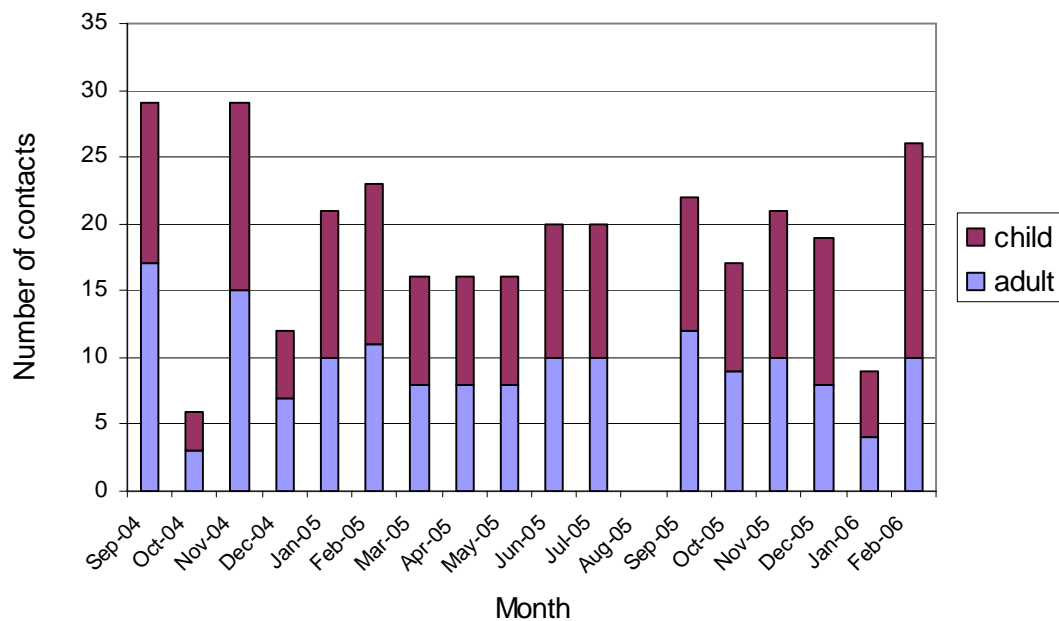
Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a computer software package, was used to plot the geographic location of families who used the parent and child groups, in order to provide a further indicator of service reach.

4.2 Ladybirds Club: service uptake by families

The Ladybirds Club runs a twelve-week programme consisting of weekly sessions for the same group of parents/carers and their children. The group is intentionally kept small, with approximately 15 parents/carers invited to participate in the programme. The programme is run three times a year, coinciding with the school terms.

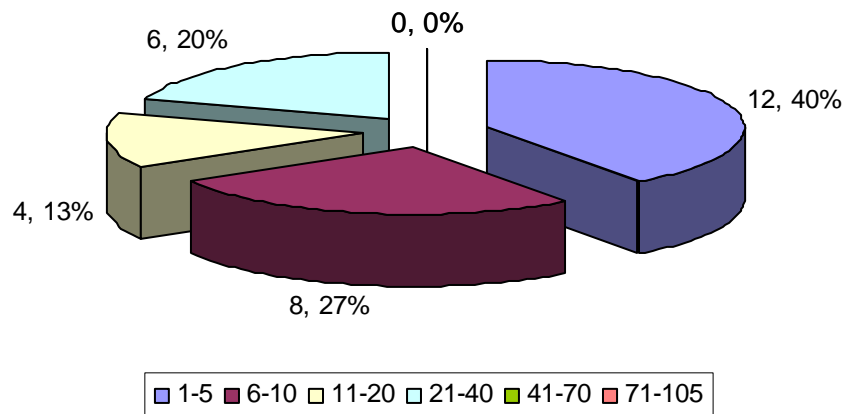
The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had per month for the 18-month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.2.1.

Figure 4.2.1 Ladybirds Club – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 323 contacts for this period, of which 160 were contacts with adults, and 162 were contacts with children (date of birth missing for one service user).
- The number of contacts ranged from 6 to 29 per month, with a mean of 18 per month.
- This suggests that the group was not regularly attended by the families enrolled on each of the twelve week courses, as the number of contacts varies quite widely.

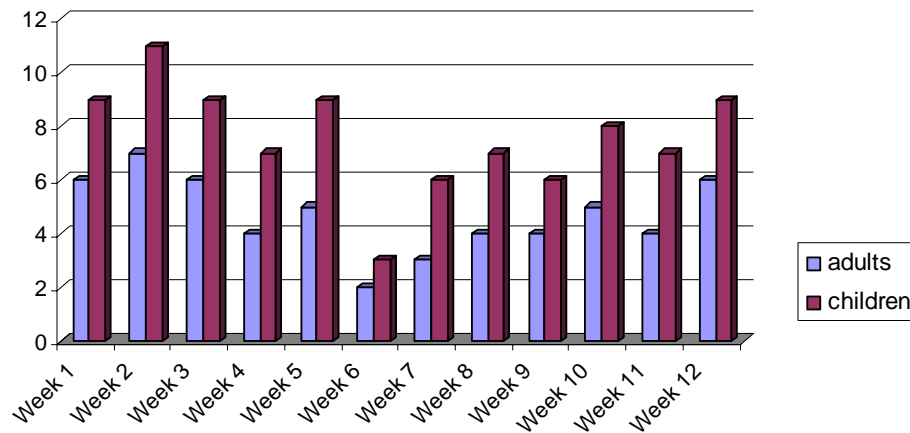
Figure 4.2.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Ladybirds Club during the 18 month period



- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 30 different families accessed the Ladybirds Club.
- As the Ladybirds Club is delivered as a closed group over a 12-week programme, the number of contacts per family should be expected to be within a similar range, at about 12 contacts, however this is not the case.
- 40% of families (12 families) had had between one and five contacts with the service, which suggested that several families did not complete the 12-week course, but only attended one or two sessions.
- Conversely, 20% of families (six families) had had between 21 and 40 contacts with the Ladybirds Club.
- No families had more than 40 contacts with the Ladybirds Club.

In order to further explore service uptake for the Ladybirds Club, attendance figures were collected for the entirety of one of the 12-week courses. This course was run between January 2006 and May 2006. The attendance data for this particular programme is presented below in Figure 4.2.3. These are the attendance figures for all families who attended, not just those who are registered with Sure Start Winsford, as this data was collected from records kept by the session facilitators rather than the MCA database.

Figure 4.2.3 Attendance figures for the 12-week Ladybirds Club programme (January 2006 - May 2006)

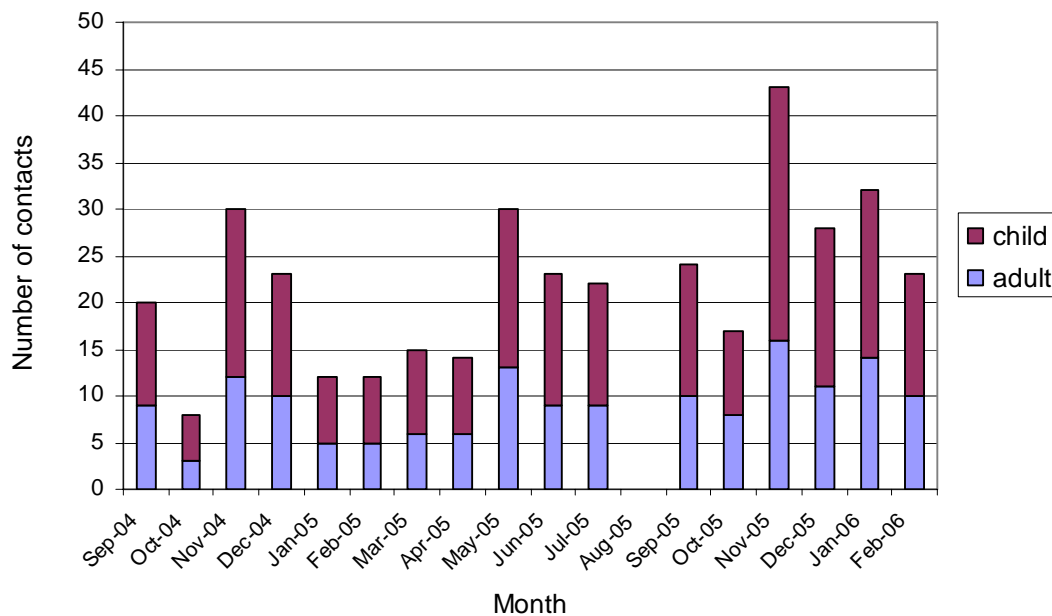


- A total of 15 parents/carers were invited to attend this 12-week programme.
- The number of parents/carers who attended each session ranged from two to seven.
- Over the twelve week period, an average of five parents/carers and eight children attended each session. This means that the service was not operating to its full capacity as the total number of spaces available were not filled as not all families invited did attend.

4.3 Ladybirds in Greenfields: service uptake by families

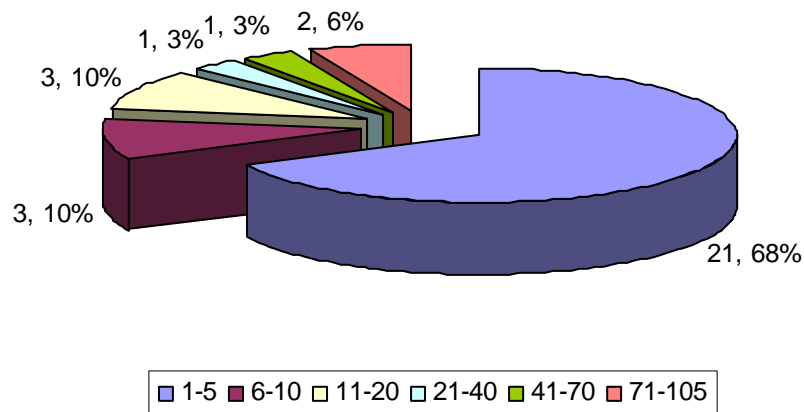
This group follows the activities planned for the Ladybirds Club but this is not a closed 12-week programme, it is open to all local families and the number of places is not limited. The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had per month for the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.3.1.

Figure 4.3.1 Ladybirds in Greenfields – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 376 contacts for this period, of which 156 were contacts with adults, and 220 were contacts with children.
- It is a rising profile in broad terms, with the number of contacts increasing over time.
- The total number of contacts per month for this service was varied and ranged from 8 to 43.
- The mean number of contacts per month was 21.

Figure 4.3.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with Ladybirds in Greenfields during the 18 month period

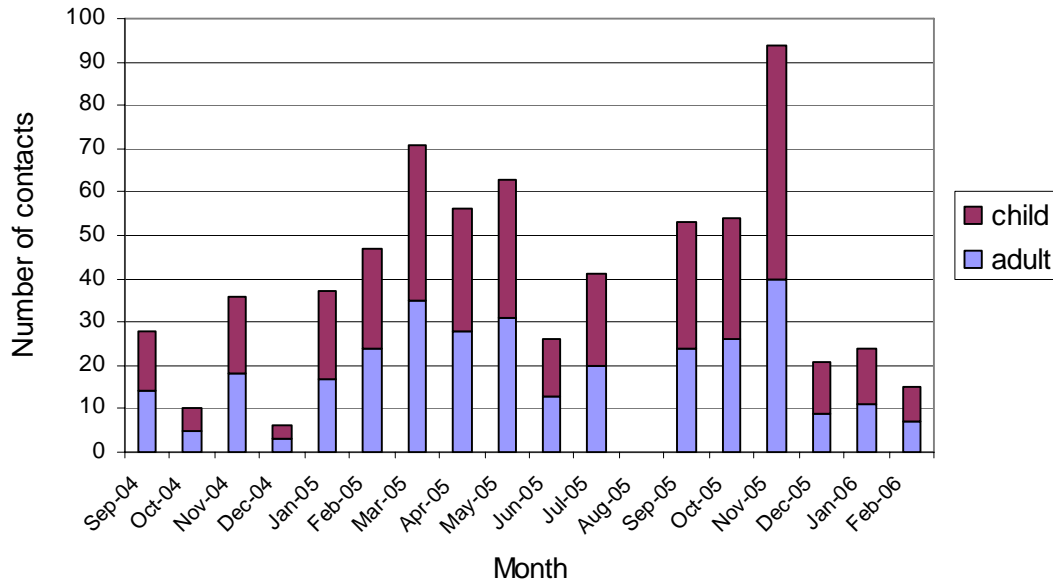


- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 31 different families accessed the Ladybirds in Greenfields group.
- The majority of these families (68%, 21 families) had between just one and five contacts with this service during the 18 month period.
- These figures suggest that the majority of contacts with this service are made by a relatively small number of families as 6% of families (2 families) had had between 71 and 105 contacts with the service.

4.4 Library Ladybirds: service uptake by families

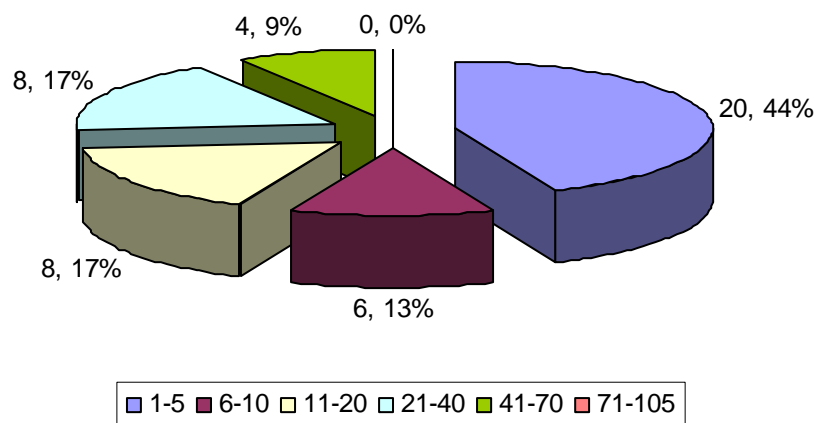
The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had monthly for the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.4.1.

Figure 4.4.1 Library Ladybirds – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 683 contacts for this period, of which 325 were contacts with adults and 357 were contacts with children (no date of birth recorded for one contact).
- The total number of contacts per month for this service ranged from 6 to 94, with a mean of 38 per month.
- These figures warrant further investigation in order to ascertain the reasons why the monthly number of contacts was so wide ranging.

Figure 4.4.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with Library Ladybirds during the 18 month period

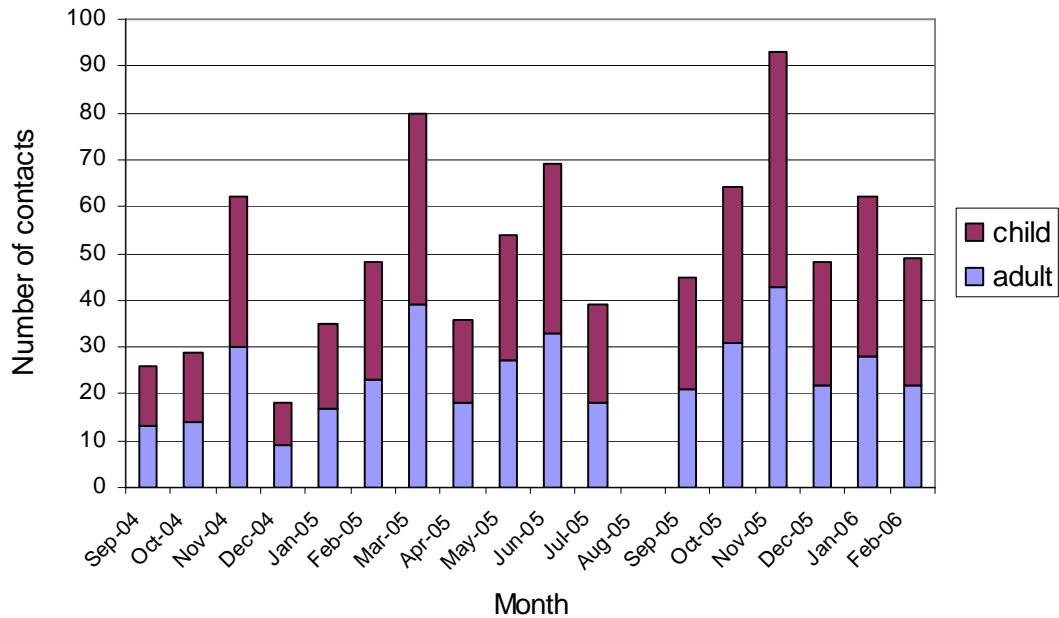


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- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 46 different families accessed the Library Ladybirds group.
 - The largest proportion of families had between one and five contacts with the service (44%, 20 families).
 - However, several families made more frequent use of the service, with 26% (12 families) having between 21 and 70 contacts.
 - No families had more than 70 contacts with the service.

4.5 Playtime Club: service uptake by families

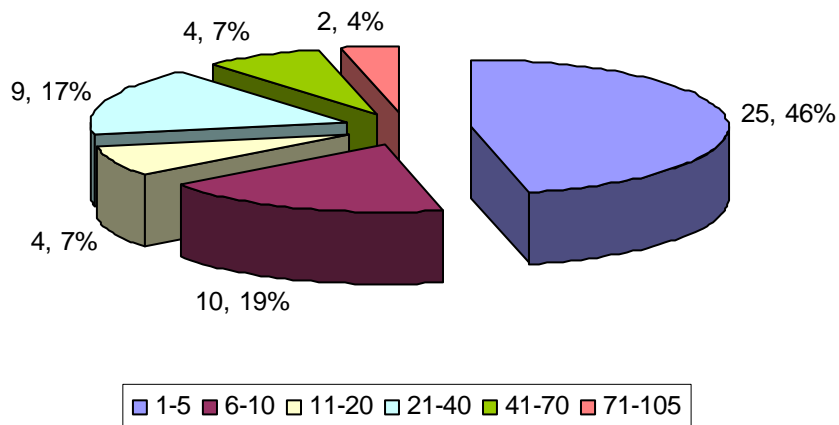
The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had monthly for the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.5.1.

Figure 4.5.1 Playtime Club – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 857 contacts for this period, of which 408 were contacts with adults and 449 were contacts with children.
- The total number of contacts per month for this service ranged from 18 to 93.
- The mean number of contacts per month was 48.

Figure 4.5.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Playtime Club during the 18 month period

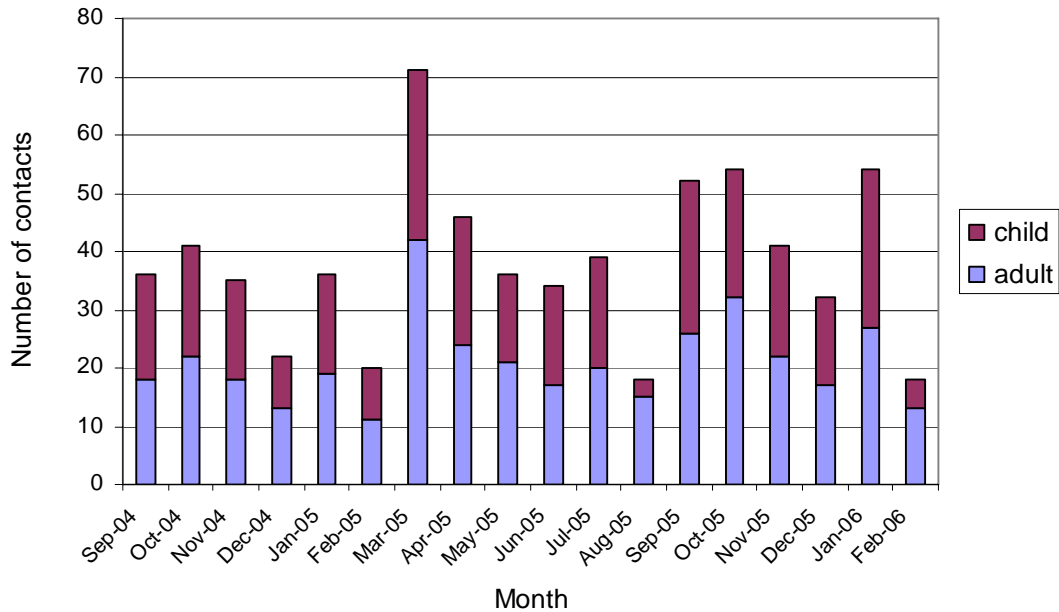


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- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 54 different families accessed the Playtime Club.
 - A large proportion of the families had between one and five contacts with the service (46%, 25 families).
 - However, the majority of families had more than five contacts with the service (54%, 29 families).
 - In total, 28% (17 families) had between 21 and 105 contacts per family.

4.6 Friday Drop-In: service uptake by families

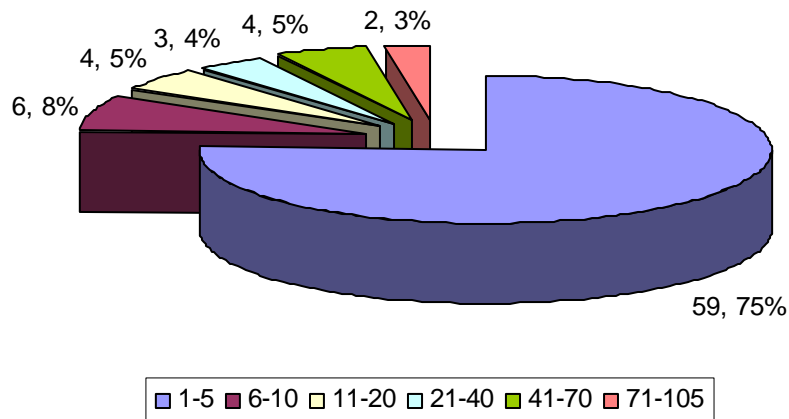
The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had monthly for the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.6.1.

Figure 4.6.1 Friday Drop-In – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 685 contacts for this period, of which 377 were contacts with adults and 308 were contacts with children.
- The total number of contacts per month for this service ranged from 18 to 71.
- The mean number of contacts per month was 38.

Figure 4.6.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Friday Drop-In during the 18 month period

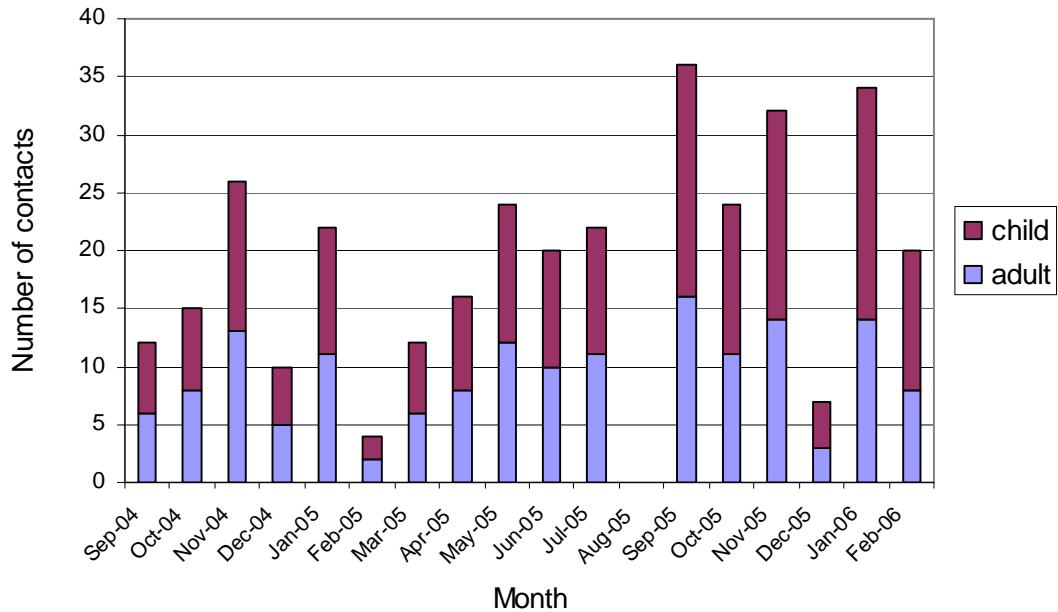


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- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 78 different families accessed the Drop-In service.
 - The majority of the families accessed the service between one and five times (75%, 59 families). This is consistent with the nature of the service, in that it is a drop-in service that families can access if and when they need support and advice, rather than a group which people would be expected to attend regularly.

4.7 Parent and Baby Group: service uptake by families

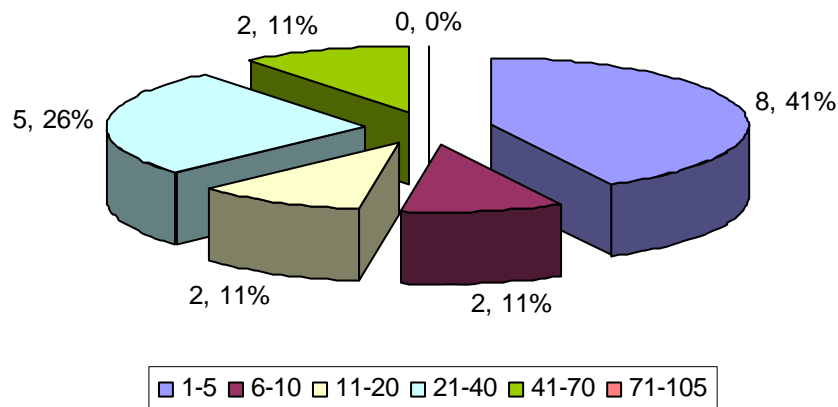
The number of contacts with parents/carers and children that this service had monthly for the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006, is presented below, in Figure 4.7.1.

Figure 4.7.1 Parent and Baby Group – number of contacts per month



- The service had a total number of 337 contacts for this period, of which 158 were contacts with adults and 178 were contacts with children (date of birth missing for one recorded contact).
- The total number of contacts per month for this service ranged from 4 to 36.
- The mean number of contacts per month was 19.

Figure 4.7.2 Proportion of individual families by number of contacts with the Parent and Baby Group during the 18 month period



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- During the period of time from September 2004 until February 2006, a total of 19 different families accessed the Parent and Baby Group.
 - The number of contacts each family had with the service was varied.
 - 37% of families (7 families) had between 21 and 70 contacts.
 - No families had more than 70 contacts with the service.

4.8 Number of services overall used by individual families

The number of different families that accessed each individual service during the 18 month period is summarised below, in Table 4.8.1.

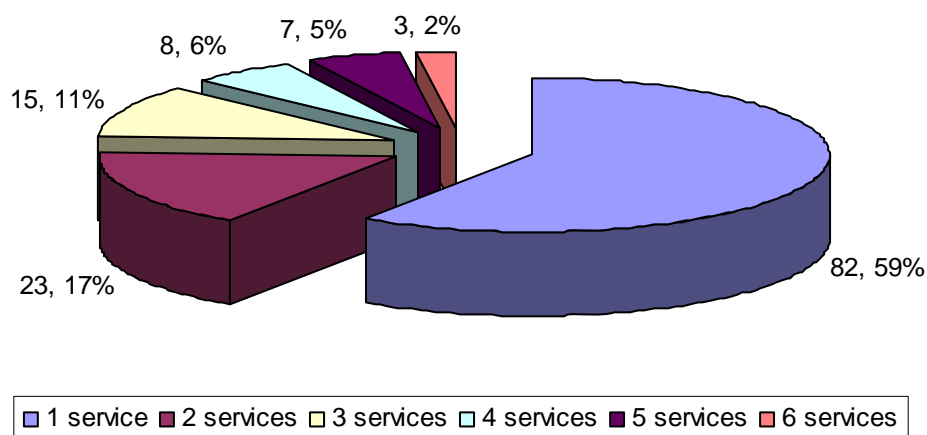
Table 4.8.1 Number of different families that accessed each service and the total number of contacts between September 2004 and February 2006

Service	Number of different families that accessed the service	Total number of contacts
Friday Drop-In	78	685
Playtime Club	54	857
Library Ladybirds	46	683
Ladybirds in Greenfields	31	376
Ladybirds Club	30	323
Parent and Baby Group	19	337

- Of all the services, the Friday Drop-In service was accessed by the largest number of families (78 families).
- The service accessed by the second largest number of families was the Playtime Club (54 families), followed by Library Ladybirds (46 families).
- The service accessed by the smallest number of families was the Parent and Baby Group (19 families). However, this group is aimed at parents with babies between the ages of nought and 15 months and so the potential number of service users would be smaller than for the other groups which are aimed at families with children between the ages of 15 months and 5 years.
- The Ladybirds Club was accessed by 30 parents. This could reflect the nature of this service, in that it is a closed group, offering an intensive 12-week programme to a small group of parents.

In total, 138 different families accessed the parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum between September 2004 and February 2006. Figure 4.8.1 below shows the number of different services used by each individual family.

Figure 4.8.1 Number of services used by individual families



- The majority of families accessed just one service (59%, 82 families).
- With regard to the Parent and Baby Group, first-time parents with babies would only access that group, as their children would be too young for the other groups, for which this groups acts as a feeder. However, if there are older siblings, they may access the other groups as a family.
- Several families had accessed more than one service, with 13 % (18 families) having accessed between 4 and 6 of the services.

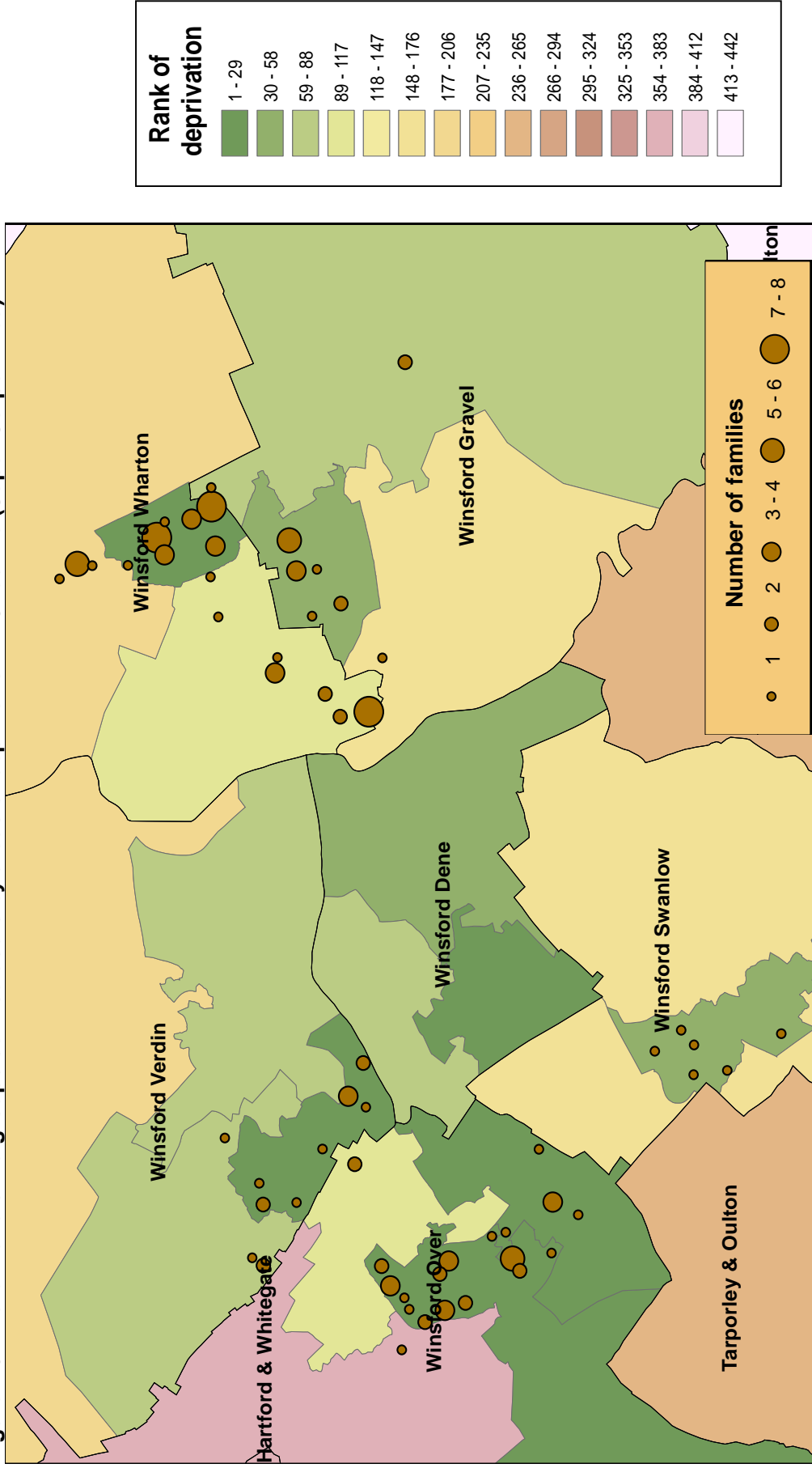
4.9 Geographical reach of the parent and child groups

The service uptake data was also used to examine the geographical reach of the parent and child groups. Geographic Information Systems (GIS), a computer software package, was used to plot the geographic location of families who used the parent and child groups between September 2004 and February 2006.

Figure 4.9.1 shows the location of the individual families who accessed any of the parent and child groups during the given time period. This demonstrates that some families from each of the areas covered by Sure Start Winsford have accessed the parent and child groups. A higher proportion of service users were from the Wharton area which could be a reflection of the location of most of the groups.

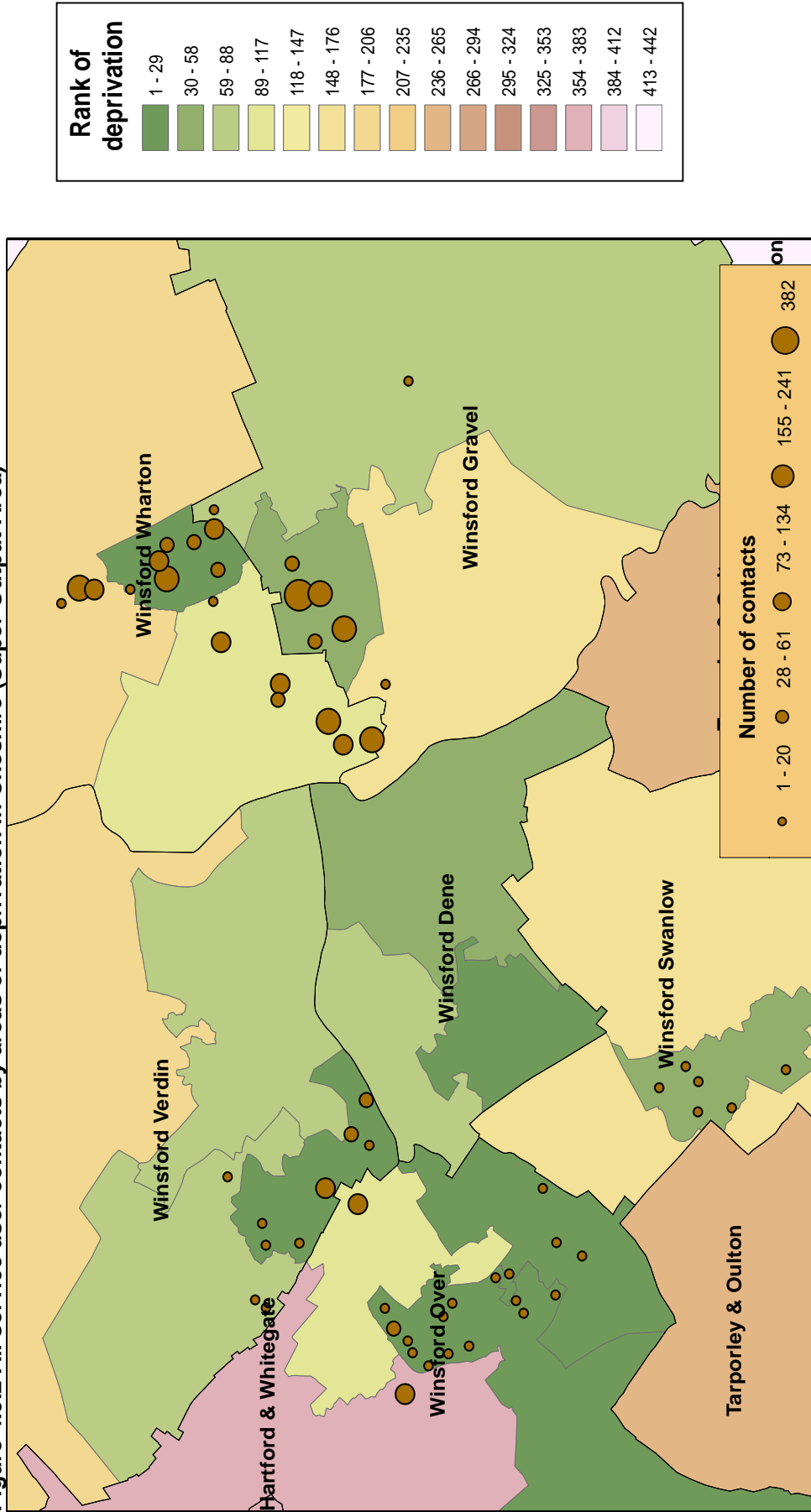
Figure 4.9.2 shows the location of service users but this time every contact is recorded, allowing the pattern of service use to be highlighted. These contacts are also mapped against the deprivation ranks for the local area. This demonstrates that the parent and child groups have been accessed by some families in the most deprived areas of Winsford.

Figure 4.9.1 Parent and child groups service users by areas of deprivation in Cheshire (Super Output Area)



(Postcode missing for 8 individuals)

Figure 4.9.2 All service user contacts by areas of deprivation in Cheshire (Super Output Area)



(Postcode missing for 91 contacts)

Chapter 5

The views and experiences of parents/carers who attend the parent and child groups

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the findings from interviews with parents/carers who had attended the parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum. The views and experiences of the parents/carers with regard to these groups is explored. Findings relate to what parents/carers think about the groups and also what they perceive to be the benefits of attending, both for their children and for themselves.

For the purpose of the evaluation, some parents/carers who accessed the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields were interviewed. These groups were targeted because it was considered that these groups had specific aims and as the Ladybirds Club was a closed group, it was anticipated that the parents/carers would have attended regularly and so may be more able to reflect on any outcomes of attending the group. However, the majority of parents/carers interviewed had attended other parent and child groups and so were also able to comment on those.

5.2 How did parents/carers find out about the Ladybirds Club and Ladybirds in Greenfields and what did they perceive to be the focus?

The majority of parents/carers interviewed had accessed other Winsford Youth Forum parent and child groups prior to accessing the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields, many for a long period of time, commonly over a year. Most of these interviewees had found out about the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields through attending the other groups, either from leaflets given out, from verbal information from the session facilitators, or from friends who had previously attended the groups. Some interviewees reported that they had first heard about the groups from their health visitor, while others said that they had first heard about them at post-natal groups.

Most parents/carers commented that the group they had attended had the purpose of enabling children to take part in craft and hands on messy activities, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'Crafts, different crafts and messy play ... I mean social wise as well but I mean we go to enough groups that she does a lot of socialising so it would be more the messy play and the crafts, yes.' (Parent/carer 4).

Some interviewees considered that the group aimed to prepare children for school, as the following quotation demonstrates:

'Just to start getting them ready for school.' (Parent/carer 4).

One parent/carer explained that the group had been suggested to her by her health visitor because she was having some difficulty with her child's behaviour.

While school readiness is one of the aims of the group, as described by the session facilitators, another focus is encouraging and supporting parents to interact with their child through play. None of the parents interviewed mentioned this as a focus of the group, although it was referred to by some when asked what they liked about the groups.

5.3 What did parents/carers like about the groups?

Parents/carers described several things that they liked about the groups. It is important to report on this as the findings may have implications for engaging service users.

Parents/carers described the groups as being well organised. They were also considered to be structured, particularly when compared with other parent and child groups, as the following quotation illustrates:

'Because it's quite structured. Some of the ones that aren't run by Sure Start don't tend to be quite as structured but this one is ... they know exactly what they're doing each time, yes. Because you know if they've not done a craft the kids ask how come we've not done, you know, they know what they should be doing when they come. So it just gives them some structure before they go to school. It's quite nice having some of the other playgroups its quite good because they do get to just run and do what they want for a couple of hours but then its nice to bring on something a bit structured where like they have to sit down to eat their snack and stuff like that.' (Parent/carer 6).

The Ladybirds Club is a closed group, in which numbers are limited to no more than ten families. This is not the case for Ladybirds in Greenfields which is open to all parents/carers. The small group at the Ladybirds Club was considered beneficial by several parents/carers, as it allowed children to gain more attention from the session facilitators than in a larger group. This is illustrated in the following quotation:

'Definitely, yes definitely the small numbers because they get one on one attention. I mean kids at that age just think (the session facilitators) are god. So I mean the fact that they will speak to them more on Tuesday and do stuff more, you know they see themselves to be a little bit special that they're getting the attention off them and stuff.' (Parent/carer 4).

The small group was considered to allow children to learn and develop skills more easily than in a larger group:

'I found it extremely helpful because it was a small group so it was concentrated; it was more concentration on the child. And at the age the child was it was helping them to like share toys with other children whereas in a big place like today because there's so many children its hard to actually sit down and explain. So it was easier for things like that for the child. Sharing was just one of the things that come to mind.' (Parent/carer 2).

It was also seen as an advantage for the children that the same families attend:

'And a lot of the children all go to the same ones so he knows all the children anyway, you know so I think it's a good thing because they make friends better then.' (Parent/carer 12).

Some parents/carers also preferred a small familiar group, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'Well this group in particular the same people go every week. It's not a drop-in so you know who you're going to see. You know the amount of people that will be here. So you can judge before you come. Some weeks you go to a group and it's just, you know it's too packed and you don't get to be able to do anything because obviously I've two so its hard to be able to relax and leave one to play because it's busy.' (Parent/carer 4).

The groups were also described as having a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. This was attributed to the efforts of the session facilitators to welcome people and put them at ease, as illustrated by the following quotations:

'It's very friendly and relaxed. You know (the session facilitators) make it warm and welcoming.' (Parent/carer 9).

One parent/carer commented that this was special to these groups:

'Just the staff really ... they've just got it at the right level you know for the different ages of the children, so it's, and it's always a happy atmosphere. They just create that, like a safe environment, you know, that's, which I don't think you would anywhere else as well.' (Parent/carer 2).

Parents/carers interviewed commented on the ability of the session facilitators to relate well to the children and adults attending. Session facilitators were said to be very popular with the children, as in the following example:

'I just think (the session facilitator) is great with the kids and she interacts great and she obviously makes a lovely snack and I just think the kids absolutely love her. You know, you know straight away as soon as, as soon as she walks through the door she's shouting for (session facilitator's name). She absolutely loves her.' (Parent/carer 4).

Parents/carers also said that they felt the session facilitators understood what they were experiencing, and were realistic about the demands of parenting, as the following interviewee explained:

'How they relate to you, they know what you're going through with the kids ... And you know, I suppose they're taught, you know, this is this and this is this, but (the session facilitator) has her own experience so she knows you've got to bend the rules a bit in some aspects. So you've just got to play it by ear with them. And she knows that all kids are different, you know kids come on at different ages and at different stages, so you just have to adapt to how you're dealing with each one of them.' (Parent/carer 5).

Parents/carers reported that their children enjoyed attending the groups, as in the following example:

'... he enjoys it so much, he's excited before and he know the group and the door especially. So when he sees the doors he's very happy and he's excited. And one time when I had to take him a little bit early, he cried.' (Parent/carer 11).

Some children were reported to look forward to the groups:

'He really enjoys it. He doesn't like it when we don't come – 'go club mum, do painting, gluing'. So he enjoys it.' (Parent/carer 3).

Parents/carers said that their children particularly enjoyed the craft activities and the messy activities and commented this was beneficial because these were not activities the children would usually do at home, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'... oh he liked everything actually. But there was one in particular where they did, they did like mixtures of water and sand and it was all this, I think its glug or something and he got it absolutely everywhere, all over his hair, all over his face and clothes and he just loved it. So it was activities that we don't actually do at home. So he obviously enjoyed the cars and things like that as well but I think he got more out of the creative side.' (Parent/carer 2).

Parents/carers considered that they would be unable to do some of these activities at home, especially the messy ones:

'Because it's more, its creative for (my child) and you know you can do things here that you can't do in your own home. I mean they've got soil out there haven't they, I'm not going to put a box of soil in the middle of me living room, am I? And they've really enjoyed it.' (Parent/carer 5).

The parents/carers interviewed also liked the way that the session facilitators make a conscious effort to provide a healthy snack for the children, and try to include some foods the children may not have tried, such as more unusual or exotic fruit and vegetables. Some parents/carers made positive comments about the snacks, as in the following example:

'But you come and they have good food and you know nice, you know they're going to come and have a healthy snack mid-morning and they can go home and have dinner.' (Parent/carer 5).

The setting of Greenfields Infant and Junior School, used for the Ladybirds in Greenfields group, was commented upon as being a very suitable venue:

'... the rooms layout as well, I think, it's a bonus that it's layout, you know, it's a nursery room isn't it so it's going to be well equipped and well laid out for the children to play in and feel relaxed in. You know, instead of it being such a big, one big hall, I don't think the children would be the same.' (Parent/carer 9).

Some parents also highlighted the outdoor space which children had access to in this setting as a further benefit, as the following quotation illustrates:

'... I like how they go outside here and he likes that ... they go outside which is great because they've got their own little outdoor space here and they get the trikes and the prams out for them to push around and play on. And they can play on the little slide outside.' (Parent/carer 10).

5.4 What did parents/carers think could be improved about the groups?

Parents/carers were asked to suggest ways in which they thought the groups could be improved. It was suggested that the Ladybirds Club could be used to allow parents/carers access to more specialist support, as the following quotation illustrates:

'... because it's a small concentrated group, have different children in who had the same or similar problem, and get a professional person in to help the children overcome that problem ... if like a child had behavioural problems, not that my child has, but there are a couple who come to the groups who do have problems. Well, people who are professional in that field could actually come and just speak to the parents and help them you know to overcome.' (Parent/carer 2).

The Ladybirds Club previously received support from the Sure Start Winsford speech and language therapist, who attended sessions regularly to talk to parents and offer advice about children's speech and language development. However, this member of staff is currently on maternity leave and this role has not been filled by any other professional.

Restricted resources meant that some equipment at the parent and child groups is limited, for example, at the Ladybirds Club there is only one high chair available for use at snack time. It was suggested that an increase in resources would lead to improvement as the groups could then have a wider range of toys available, as the following interviewee explained:

'I just think if there was more funding really. You know I go to other groups ... and they seem to have a hell of a lot more toys, high chairs ... So I think that the toys are always the same, whereas I go to different groups and different weeks they put out different toys ... So I just think maybe here's a bit restricted. You know, obviously if it's the same thing every week the kids get used to the same thing, but the likes of the high chair if somebody's using the high chair it means I can only feed, you know watch one of them.' (Parent/carer 4).

One parent explained that some children do not like the very healthy options available at snack time and do not eat them:

'It usually tends to be the same food or it's food that kids don't really like, what was it one week? They had a yoghurt but it was a natural yoghurt and (my child) doesn't like natural yoghurt and I know some of the other kids wouldn't eat it as well. So food that you know that a kid, I mean they could have

got Petit Filou yoghurts or something like that or the cheaper ones that they know the kids are going to eat.’ (Parent/carer 3).

However, introducing healthy foods and encouraging a healthy diet is one of the aims of the group, which was also commented upon positively by some parents/carers interviewed.

One parent commented that some children have become very familiar with the songs used in the group and would benefit from more variety:

‘I’d probably say if they done a few different songs at the end, the kids are getting to know, he’s getting to a stage where he wants to learn different ones. A few different songs.’ (Parent/carer 3).

It was suggested that the same group of parents/carers tended to access the service and that it would be beneficial if some different parents/carers began attending the groups, as one parent explained had happened recently:

‘... for a certain amount of time there was just the people that come, they come all the time, and then I think it’s only the past few weeks that I’ve started seeing new people come and then it’s nice. It’s good to see younger people coming in, and you get to meet new friends don’t you.’ (Parent/carer 5).

One parent/carer explained that some parents/carers who are actually referred to the groups attend only for a short period of time and then do not return:

‘As I say the only thing with it is that some people come and then come for a couple of weeks and then don’t come but unfortunately that’s usually the people it’s sort of aimed at, you know, sort of poorer families off the estates. They’ve been told to come by their health visitor and they come for a few weeks and then don’t come again sort of thing.’ (Parent/carer 6).

All of the Winsford Youth Forum parent and child groups, except for Ladybirds in Greenfields, are held in the Wharton area of Winsford. Some interviewees commented that for some parents it is difficult to travel across Winsford to reach these groups, as it is some distance to travel without transport. The following comment is from a parent/carer who accessed the Ladybirds in Greenfields group:

‘... because a lot of the ones that (the session facilitators) do are at the other end of town, so obviously a lot of people have trouble getting there so this is the one sort of that people can access at this end ... I think it’s a shame that there isn’t something on different days here perhaps.’ (Parent/carer 6).

It was suggested that Wharton Youth Centre was not totally reliable as a venue for parent and child groups as sessions have had to be cancelled due to, for example, heating breaking down. This type of problem had led to some sessions being cancelled at the last minute, as the following parent/carer explained:

'... getting a call at like quarter past nine when I'm just getting the kids in the car and they're dressed and then we've got nowhere to go, you know, and then it's a disappointment for them isn't it?' (Parent/carer 5).

It was commented that some settings could be improved, for example, there was a comment that the floor was dirty at Willow Wood Community Centre, which is used for children to run around and play. A comment was also made about the appearance of Wharton Youth Centre, where several of the parent and child groups are held:

'It looks a bit decrepit from outside doesn't it. But it does what it needs to do doesn't it?' (Parent/carer 12).

The outside play area at the Ladybirds in Greenfields group was commented upon positively by parents/carers. By contrast, the lack of outside space for the groups to use at all venues except for the Ladybirds in Greenfields group was an area where suggestions for improvements were made, as the following quotation illustrates:

'I think it would be good for the group to have access to the garden or outside and ideas like ... maybe more outside activities ... Also, I don't know maybe a short visit to the park or something like that to pick up the leaves or something like that ... Picnic or something like that, in an enclosed garden or something, would be great for the group.' (Parent/carer 11).

Some parents/carers were eagerly anticipating the introduction of the new children's centres in Winsford, as they considered that the settings would be an improvement, as the following interviewee explained:

'I think the only thing that is going to improve it really is having the new facility and having a better place and more reliable place to come if you like, because obviously with the heating in this place and whatnot and there's a Wednesday club that's on, and the floor's filthy and things like that. So when you know it's just waiting for the new facility to come in and then you know everything will be there, I think that will just top it all off.' (Parent/carer 5).

5.5 What were the outcomes for parents/carers of attending the groups?

Several parents/carers reported that they had met other parents as a result of attending the groups. This was considered helpful as it enabled parents/carers to share information and experiences of parenting, and the different resources and facilities available locally, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'Well I get to chat to other mums as well. Like at the moment it's about toilet training, they're all doing, seem to be doing it at the same time, so we can all refer different things and what's going on. What else is going on around Winsford we might not have known about.' (Parent/carer 3).

Meeting other parents and sharing experiences of parenting was considered particularly helpful by some of the first-time parents, for whom parenting was a new experience, as in the following example:

'... I learn a lot, little small things like I see other mums have the same problems I have as a first-time mum.' (Parent/carer 11).

Meeting other parents and sharing experiences, as well as talking to the session facilitators, was considered by some interviewees to help parents by providing reassurance and enabling them to become more confident in themselves as parents, as the following parent/carer explained:

'... I think with being a mother as well, because when it's new to you, you think – am I doing the right thing? Am I bringing up my children right? You don't know because there's no book there to say this is right and this is wrong. So I think yes it gives you confidence as a mother to say, yes, you are doing what you can basically for your children.' (Parent/carer 2).

Many of the parents/carers interviewed mentioned getting out of the house as an important outcome of attending the groups, as in the following examples:

'It gets me out of the house.' (Parent/carer 3).

'And I like to get out, it's nice for me to be out and just feel like you're part of a group really and you're talking to other mums. I think it's so important. I felt that so much when I had (my child) ... because I worked before I had him. And then once I'd had him I just felt that the groups were so important to get out.' (Parent/carer 10).

Therefore the groups appeared to make a significant contribution to avoiding social isolation for some parents/carers. The related outcomes of this were described by parents/carers as reduced stress for parents, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'I just hope they keep going because if there weren't these groups I don't know what I'd do. Me house would be spotless. You know I'd be at home doing me housework all day and the kids just, you know, they'd get withdrawn and that ... Yes it's really helpful. I don't get stressed because you know we have that break and we come out and I get a break. Well I know I'm with them but I get that break because they're playing. When we're at home they're on top of me.' (Parent/carer 7).

Getting out of the house through attending the groups had led to some parents/carers developing a social network which has extended to parents/carers meeting up and socialising outside of the groups too, as the following quotation illustrates:

'Yes meeting everyone, we've got a whole bunch of new friends. It's great we go out with them all the time. Birthdays and parties and you know the kid's parties, yes, lots of new friends.' (Parent/carer 5).

It had also led to some parents/carers going out to other places and attending new groups, again helping them to avoid social isolation:

'You know I go out a lot more and it's led to going to other groups as well, do you know what I mean. I'm just going out other places as well.' (Parent/carer 9).

Attending the groups had also resulted in some parents/carers feeling more confident in social situations, as the following interviewee explained:

'Yes I'm a bit more outgoing actually than I used to be because I was so nervous about coming here.' (Parent/carer 8).

Some parents/carers interviewed reported that attending the groups had provided them with practical ideas for activities to do at home with their children:

'And it give me ideas as well to do you know at home with him ... you know like the sponge painting or with the vegetables, you know, vegetable prints and things like that. So that sort of give me things to do.' (Parent/carer 10).

As well as providing practical ideas for activities, the groups were considered to provide parents with ideas about how to play with their children, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'It gives you ideas of what you can do ... Yes, just giving you ideas of how to play with the kids as well, it gives you ideas in that way.' (Parent/carer 5).

For some parents/carers this resulted in them learning more about their children's abilities and therefore providing more age and developmentally appropriate activities, as the following interviewees explained:

'In the back of my mind I want to treat him like a little tiny baby and protect him from hurting or something like that. But now I give him a pot in the garden and let him do things.' (Parent/carer 11).

A further outcome of attending the groups for some parents was learning new strategies for dealing with their children's behaviour. The following interviewee explained how the session facilitators provided advice and also modelled behaviour management techniques:

'And (the session facilitators) they do help you a lot. They always ask me how (my child)'s been and try this, try that ... And when she's like, she used to be really bad with tempers (my child) and like (the session facilitators) can just sort her out and distract her really good at that ... when we used to take (my child) outside, she would never come back in so (the session facilitator) used to say, 'just 5 minutes' before say 'we're going in in a minute', 'going in soon' ... and it does work.' (Parent/carer 8).

This parent/carer went on to say that this had led to changes at home, in terms of dealing with children's behaviour:

'You know they're firm with them, they don't shout at them or anything like that, yet they can stop them when they have

their paddies ... you find yourself not losing your temper so much at home because you realise it really doesn't work.' (Parent/carer 8).

5.6 What were the outcomes for children of attending the groups?

Although some parents/carers did point out that the outcomes for children could not be necessarily attributed solely to the group as children tended to access other groups too, a number of positive outcomes for children were described.

Several parents commented that their children had been quite shy or withdrawn before attending the groups but that they had since become more confident, as in the following example:

'And I think he was quite shy when he was little I think that's why I started bringing him to a lot of groups, it built his confidence with other children and adults as well.' (Parent/carer 6).

This confidence had resulted in positive changes in behaviour:

'She's a lot more outgoing now.' (Parent/carer 8).

Parents/carers considered that an important aspect of attending the groups was the opportunity it provided for their children to mix with other children:

'I think it's good for the children because it's such a, you know, getting them used to mixing with other children as well.' (Parent/carer 10).

This was considered particularly important for children who did not have siblings at home, as the following quotation illustrates:

'But also because (my child) was an only child, he, it was nice to get him involved with other children, you know and interact. And it's like these sessions the same, it's just because they learn off other children as well. I think they learn off other children more than what they do from parents.' (Parent/carer 2).

Mixing with other children was seen as a benefit because of the impact on children's social skills. Learning to share and to take turns was mentioned by several parents/carers as a positive outcome, as in the following examples:

'You know, so they can all sort of share, different ages and abilities. So they can see a different, you know children of different ages and abilities and backgrounds playing so they can all learn to share.' (Parent/carer 9).

Some children's behaviour was considered by parents/carers to have improved since attending the groups, although the possibility of this being age-related was also considered, as the following quotations illustrate:

'Well when he was younger he used to bite children, well now he doesn't. So you know what I mean. And he doesn't kick or hit so he's not violent towards any child or ... I think it was just he didn't know it was not acceptable, do you see what I mean.'

And I think coming to the groups did help. I think it was more for me as well.’ (Parent/carer 2).

Children’s speech and language development was also considered by some parents to be an outcome of attending the groups, as the following interviewee explained:

‘I mean since I’ve started coming with (my child), he’s really in himself and quite placid you know, but then you come to places like this and you come out and he starts talking. I think its brought speech on and the confidence that they have in themselves.’ (Parent/carer 5).

Some parents/carers considered that getting used to the routines at the groups, such as sitting down together to eat, and cooperating with tidy-up time procedures, had helped their children to prepare for when they start school. For some parents this had led to changes in the home environment too, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘Teaching her to sit at the table for food, they’re not allowed to leave the table ... Yes, well it makes me think at home then I’ll make her do it at home, whereas, I think if I hadn’t have come here I’d have been more inclined to just let her potter around the house and eat what she wants and stuff.’ (Parent/carer 4).

Some children who attend the Ladybirds in Greenfields group later go on to attend the nursery at Greenfields Infant and Junior School, which is in the same venue, and so are already familiar and confident in the surroundings. This was the case, as described by the following interviewee:

‘And it’s helped me eldest one anyway to come into nursery. He hasn’t wanted to, he wasn’t clingy when he come to nursery, he just went straight into it because this is where he come to nursery. So he knew the surroundings and that so that’s why we brought him here to the group in the school because he knew the surroundings.’ (Parent/carer 7).

The focus on healthy snacks at the group had encouraged some parents to consider and improve their children’s diets at home, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘... at the group (the session facilitator) introduced smoothie makers and I’ve started doing them at home. And I’ve found because (my children), they weren’t eating fruit as often as what they should, so I started doing these smoothies and that’s how I’ve got them getting the fruit down them through these smoothies ... Yes they really like those ... And brown bread as well. They didn’t used to like brown bread and now they like brown bread.’ (Parent/carer 7).

5.7 Conclusion

A range of different outcomes of attending the groups were reported for both parents/carers and their children. An underlying theme relevant to many of these outcomes was the relationships that the session facilitators had developed with the parents/carers and their children. This could therefore be an important factor in engaging families with the service.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

Findings from observation of the different parent and child sessions, interviews with parents who use the service, and analysis of existing service activity data, have provided an overall picture of the parent and child groups provided for Sure Start Winsford by Winsford Youth Forum. In combining the findings from each of these sources it has been possible to identify key issues relating to the service, and to highlight the positive aspects as well as potential areas of improvement. These are described in the following sections.

6.2 The experiences and views of parents/carers

Although interviewees were asked specifically about the Ladybirds Club and Ladybirds in Greenfields, most regularly attended other Winsford Youth Forum parent and child groups run by the session facilitators and so made some comments about the service as a whole. Parents/carers described several things they particularly liked about the groups. They considered the groups to be well-structured and organised, with a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. They liked the small groups, the way staff related to parents and children, and the healthy snacks. Children were said to really enjoy attending and especially enjoyed the craft and messy activities which were not always available at home.

Parents/carers interviewed identified positive outcomes of attending the Ladybirds Club or Ladybirds in Greenfields, both for parents and for children. For parents, important outcomes included meeting other parents and sharing experiences, and avoiding social isolation. Other positive outcomes identified by parents/carers included increased confidence in their parenting skills, learning new ideas for activities to do with children, and learning new ways of managing children's behaviour. This meant that parents/carers learnt new ways of interacting with and relating to their children that were taken beyond the specific settings and transferred to the home environment.

A number of positive outcomes for children were described, although some parents/carers pointed out that the outcomes for children could not be necessarily attributed solely to the group as children tended to access other groups too, and some changes could also have been attributed to children becoming older. The positive outcomes identified included increased confidence, development of social skills, improved behaviour, speech and language development, preparation for school, and a healthier diet.

6.3 The session facilitators

The session facilitators were highlighted as a positive aspect of the service, through both the observation of sessions and interviews with parents. The staffing is consistent across all the groups and the two session facilitators were well established

and known and trusted by families who use the service. Trust is an important factor in engaging families.

Interaction was identified as a strength of all the parent and child groups on the ECERS-R profiles. The session facilitators have developed positive relationships with the children and parents who attend. The staff evidently enjoy being with the children and model and encourage a mutual respect between children and adults. Interaction and cooperation between the two session facilitators was also consistently good. They communicate well with each other and share responsibilities so that the sessions run smoothly.

However, the ECERS-R profile also revealed that the supervision and evaluation of staff was limited. There was some occasional informal observation of sessions by a manager but no formal structure in place to support staff development. The session facilitators can access training courses but there is no structure in place for staff to receive any formal feedback from managers about their performance.

6.4 Reach of the service

The service uptake data presented in this report relates to families who are registered with Sure Start Winsford, as this data, as collected by the local programme, was the only data readily available. However, the actual number of families attending services may have been higher as all groups were open to non Sure Start Winsford families too. While appropriate for this report, because of circumstances at the time, with the move of Sure Start services into children's centres, the service monitoring arrangements will need to be reconsidered. As services will be available to all local families and no longer just families registered with Sure Start Winsford, the contact monitoring system will need to reflect this in order to capture data accurately on service uptake and usage.

The data presented in the report showed that a total of 138 different Sure Start Winsford registered families had accessed the six parent and child groups offered by Winsford Youth Forum during the 18 month period between September 2004 and February 2006. Individual services had attracted a varying number of families, the highest being the Friday Drop-In service (78 families), the Playtime Club (54 families), and Library Ladybirds (46 families). The services have been advertised and promoted, the session facilitators arranged for leaflets advertising the services to be left in various community venues. Several of the parents/carers interviewed reported that their health visitor had told them about the groups, indicating that the services have also been promoted by some other professionals.

However, when these attendance figures were subjected to further analysis, it was revealed that for all of the groups, a substantial number of families had had between just one and five contacts with the service. For the different groups, these families represented 68% of families (Ladybirds in Greenfields), 46% of families (Playtime Club), 44% of families (Library Ladybirds), 41% of families (Parent and Baby Group), and 40% (Ladybirds Club). For the Friday Drop-In service, this figure was 75%, but

this may be appropriate given the nature of that particular service. Yet these figures would not be expected for the other groups which offer opportunities for children and parents/carers to mix with other families. As the data shows that the overall number of contacts with each service was high, the implication is that the services are being regularly used by a relatively small number of families. Given the overall number of families who had contact with the services, this could suggest that the services are initially attracting a range of families but only retaining a small proportion of them. Reasons behind this pattern of attendance could usefully be explored, perhaps by following up families who had accessed the service only once or twice.

A further, perhaps more difficult issue that could be addressed, is whether the Ladybirds Club, designed to offer intensive support to parents/carers who are struggling to cope with their child's behaviour, is actually reaching those families it is aimed at. Of the parents who attended the most recent Ladybirds Club (January to May 2006), many were already accessing the other parent and child groups available and some reported that they had done so for a number of years. Yet the Ladybirds Club is designed as a closed 12-week programme offered to parents/carers who have been identified as those who could benefit. In total, 15 parents were invited to each twelve week programme but the session facilitators expect that only about half of those parents/carers will attend or complete the programme. Parents/carers are contacted if they do not attend and the invitation to come to the groups is reiterated. Again, it could be useful to explore reasons for non-attendance.

6.5 Settings for the different groups

The evaluation has uncovered some issues related to the different settings used by the various parent and child groups. The observations of sessions, as well as comments from parents revealed that in some ways the settings, with the exception of Ladybirds in Greenfields which is held in a nursery setting, are not ideal for this type of group. As the parent and child groups do not have a permanent setting, settings they use are also used by other community groups. The quality and appropriateness of space and furnishings reflected the various uses of the different settings and also meant that the equipment and settings are not always ideal for early childhood environments. As the groups do not have their own building from which to operate, they have little control over the furniture, equipment or resources available to them. Even at the Ladybirds in Greenfields group, as visitors in this setting, the group did not have access to an area to present child-related display, or any storage for their own materials.

A lack of outdoor space for children to play was an issue in all of the settings except Greenfields Infant and Junior School. Those settings without access to outdoor space did not have any indoor space and equipment that could be used for gross motor play either, with the exception of Willow Wood Community Centre which focused on this area.

An additional issue relates to the geographical setting of the groups. Some comments from parents/carers indicated that they would appreciate some additional

groups local to them, rather than the majority of groups operating in the Wharton area of Winsford.

The issues presented above are illustrative of arguments for and against using community venues as settings for parent and child groups. Although often it is not a purposeful choice, but rather one that is borne out of necessity, there are advantages to using community venues in that they can be more easily accessible for local families without transport. However, related difficulties can stem from the fact that the venues were not designed specifically as early years settings, and are also shared with various other groups and used for different kinds of activities. These issues could be addressed with the move of Sure Start services into children's centres.

6.6 Conclusion

Sure Start local programmes were expected to transform early learning, play and childcare services, making them more accessible and better matched to the needs of their local communities (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). The parent and child groups provided by Sure Start Winsford are valued by the families who use them and various benefits and positive outcomes were identified. A recent review of the quality of early learning, play and childcare services in Sure Start local programmes reported that parents valued services that allowed children opportunities to learn and for parents and children to enjoy activities together. For parents themselves it was important that services offered the opportunity for them to make friends which then encouraged them to move on and led to them developing their own support networks (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). Clearly the findings of this evaluation echo these messages and demonstrate that the parent and child groups are having some important outcomes for service users.

The study by Anning, Chesworth & Spurling (2005) found that services were refocusing on promoting interactions between parents and children, and supporting the social and emotional development, and speech and language development of children. However, overall there was a lack of emphasis on promoting children's cognitive development (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005). The findings from this evaluation support that general pattern of provision and focus of services.

In this evaluation, the skills of the session facilitators in gaining trust and building relationships with the families was identified as a particular strength of the parent and child groups provided by Winsford Youth Forum. This enabled session facilitators to offer advice about parenting and role model behaviour management techniques in a way that was acceptable to parents/carers. Anning, Chesworth & Spurling (2005) in their review of quality in early years services also reported that parents valued practitioners who could form positive relationships with families and provided advice about parenting in a non-stigmatised setting.

However, analysis of service uptake and usage revealed that a relatively small number of families were using the services regularly or frequently and so were responsible for many of the recorded contacts with the different groups. Also, it was

identified that significant numbers of families had accessed the groups only a small number of times and this warrants further investigation in order to uncover the possible reasons for this pattern. Therefore, while the services are valued by the families that use them, the services are not having an impact for a large number of families because they are not engaging with what is currently offered.

Finally, there were some issues with various settings used by the parent and child groups. While the setting of Greenfields Infant and Junior School, as a setting designed specifically as an early years environment, was highlighted by the ECERS-R profile, and comments from parents/carers, as a high-quality setting, other settings did have some disadvantages. These were related to the use of shared community venues as settings for early years services. Poor premises were highlighted as one of the possible threats to maintaining quality in early years settings (Anning, Chesworth & Spurling, 2005) as this meant that physical play, and outdoor play in particular were often limited. However, with the advent of new children's centres providing purpose built facilities, these difficulties may be overcome.

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Appendix 1
Participant information sheets

**Sure Start Winsford Programme Evaluation
Information for parents and carers**

Sure Start Winsford has asked the Centre for Public Health Research (CPHR) at the University of Chester to evaluate the local programme and its services. The CPHR is now looking at the Ladybirds parent and toddler groups, to find out what kind of activities and support are provided and what parents/carers think about the Ladybirds groups. In order to do this a researcher will be visiting the following groups:

- ❖ Parent and Baby Group
- ❖ Library Ladybirds
- ❖ Playtime Club
- ❖ Ladybirds in Greenfields
- ❖ Ladybirds Club
- ❖ Friday Drop-In

The researcher will observe during the sessions she visits to see what kind of activities take place. She will be looking at things like toys, furniture and how the room is set out, rather than watching the children or parents. She may also like to talk to some parents, to ask what they think about the Ladybirds groups. If you are not happy for the researcher to be present at the session please mention it to a member of staff.

If you have any questions after the observation then please contact Sarah Davies on 01244 512023, or write to her at the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ.

Thank you for reading this.

Sure Start Winsford Programme Evaluation Information for Participants

Sure Start Winsford has asked the Centre for Public Health Research (CPHR) at the University of Chester to carry out an evaluation of the local programme and its services. You are being invited to take part in an interview with a researcher who will ask you your views on the Ladybirds parent and child groups. Before you decide if you want to take part, please read the following information.



What is the purpose of the study?

We want to find out about the sort of activities and support that the different Ladybirds parent and child groups are providing. We would also like to know what people who have used the groups thought was useful and not so useful about them.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a parent who has used one or more of the Ladybirds parent and child groups. We would like to hear what you think about them.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part you can change your mind at any time and without giving a reason. This will not affect your entitlement to use Sure Start Winsford services, such as the Ladybirds groups.



What happens if I take part?

An interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient for you. At the interview the researcher and you will have a conversation about your experience of attending the Ladybirds group or groups. There are no right or wrong answers and you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. If you agree the conversation will be taped so that the researcher can be sure to report what you say accurately. The interview will take no longer than half an hour.

What happens to the information collected?

A report will be written about how the Ladybirds groups work and how well they are doing. The report will be given to Sure Start Winsford. No names or details that could identify you will be used. The interview tapes will be wiped at the end of the study.



Who can I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact Sarah Davies at the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ. Her phone number is 01244 512023.

Thank you for your interest.

Sure Start Winsford Programme Evaluation Information for Participants

Sure Start Winsford has asked the Centre for Public Health Research (CPHR) at the University of Chester to carry out an evaluation of the local programme and its services. You are being invited to take part in an interview with a researcher who will ask you your views on the Ladybirds parent and child groups. Before you decide if you want to take part, please read the following information.

What is the purpose of the study?

We want to find out about the sort of activities and support that the different Ladybirds parent and child groups are providing. We would also like to know what people who have used the groups thought was useful and not so useful about them.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a professional involved with providing and/or delivering the Ladybirds parent and child groups.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation in an interview for the evaluation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you can change your mind at any time and without giving a reason.

What happens if I take part?

An interview will be arranged at a time and place convenient for you. At the interview the researcher and you will have a discussion about your professional experiences and views in relation to the Ladybirds parent and child groups. There are no right or wrong answers and you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. If you agree the conversation will be taped so that the researcher can be sure to report what you say accurately. The interview will take no longer than one hour.

What happens to the information collected?

The interview, together with all the data collected in a variety of forms for the evaluation, will be used to write a report about how the Ladybirds groups work and how well they are doing. The report will be given to Sure Start Winsford. No names or details that could identify you will be used. The interview tapes will be wiped at the end of the study.

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact Sarah Davies at the Centre for Public Health Research, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ. Her phone number is 01244 512023.

Thank you for your interest.

Appendix 2

Interview schedules

Interview schedule – Service users
Winsford Youth Forum Parent and Child groups

- How did you find out about the Ladybirds Club?
- What made you decide to attend the group?
(Referral pathway and process)
- What did you know about the group before you started attending?
(Expectations/ perceptions and understanding of the aims and focus of the group?)
- Do you attend any other parent and child groups run by (*service providers*)?
- How regularly do you attend parent and child groups run by (*service providers*) ?
(How often, over what length of time?)
- Do you attend any other groups for parents and children?
- How regularly did you attend the Ladybirds Club?
(All 12 sessions, most sessions, a few sessions?)
- Could you tell me about the kind of things you do at the group?
- What do you like about the Ladybirds Club?
- What does your child like to do at the group?
- Have you found there have been any benefits of attending the Ladybirds Club?
(e.g. meeting other parents,
increased confidence in dealing with children's behaviour,
improved parenting skills such as use of behaviour management techniques,
adopted healthier eating habits,
increased knowledge of play activities to use with children at home)
- Have there been any benefits for your child?
(e.g. socialising with other children and adults,
play activities,
learning)
- Has your child's behaviour changed in any way since attending the group?
- Has attending the group led to any changes for you?
- What do you consider to be the good things about the Ladybirds Club?
- What do you think would improve the Ladybirds Club?
- Are there any other services for parents and children that you would find helpful?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the Ladybirds Club?

Interview schedule – Service providers
Winsford Youth Forum Parent and Child groups

- How did the Ladybird groups first come to be developed and introduced in the area?
(Evidence of identified needs?)
- Could you tell me a little about your role within the service?
(What does it involve? How long have you been in this role? What was your previous professional experience and background?)
- What are the aims of the Ladybird groups?
(Aims for parents? Aims for children?)
- How are families who might benefit from the service identified?
(Is there a targeted group? How is this defined?)
- How do parents come to access the groups?
(Promotion of services? Referral pathway and process? Links with other local services?)
- How are activities for the groups planned?
(e.g. Use of a statutory framework? Outcome focused?)
- In what ways do the environments created for the groups reflect the aims of the service?
- What are the outcomes for parents of attending the groups?
(e.g. meeting other parents,
increased confidence in dealing with children's behaviour,
improved parenting skills such as use of behaviour management techniques,
healthier eating habits adopted,
increased knowledge of play activities to use with children at home)
- What are the outcomes for the children?
(e.g. socialising with other children and adults,
play activities,
learning)
- What would you say are the strengths of the Ladybirds groups?
- How do the groups address Sure Start aims and principles?
- Is there anything that would help to improve the service offered?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the Ladybird groups?

Appendix 3
Adaptations to the ECERS-R

Overview of the Subscales and Items of the ECERS-R (Relevance to parent and child groups)

Subscale and item	Relevant to parent and child groups?	Ladybirds Club	Ladybirds in Greenfields	Library Ladybirds	Playtime Club	Friday Drop-In
I. Space and Furnishings						
1. Indoor space	✓	●	●	●	●	●
2. Furniture for routine care, play and learning	✓	●	●	●	●	●
3. Furnishings for relaxation and comfort	⌚	●	●	●		●
4. Room arrangement for play	⌚	●	●			●
5. Space for privacy	⌚	●	●			●
6. Child-related display	✓	●	●	●	●	●
7. Space for gross motor play	⌚	●	●		●	●
8. Gross motor equipment	⌚	●	●		●	●
II. Personal Care Routines						
9. Greeting/departing	✗					
10. Meals/snacks	✓	●	●	●	●	●
11. Nap/rest	✗					
12. Toileting/diapering	✗					
13. Health practices	✓	●	●	●	●	●
14. Safety practices	✓	●	●	●	●	●
III. Language-Reasoning						
15. Books and pictures	⌚	●	●	●		●
16. Encouraging children to communicate	⌚	●	●	●		●
17. Using language to develop reasoning skills	⌚	●	●	●		●
18. Informal use of language	✓	●	●	●	●	●
IV. Activities						
19. Fine motor	⌚	●	●			●
20. Art	⌚	●	●	●		●
21. Music/movement	⌚	●	●	●		●
22. Blocks	⌚	●	●			●
23. Sand/water	⌚	●	●			●
24. Dramatic play	⌚	●	●			●
25. Nature/science	⌚	●	●			●
26. Math/number	⌚	●	●			●
27. Use of TV, video, and/or computers	✗					
28. Promoting acceptance of diversity	✓	●	●	●	●	●

V. Interaction						
29. Supervision of gross motor activities	🕒	●	●		●	●
30. General supervision of children (other than gross motor)	✓	●	●	●	●	●
31. Discipline	✓	●	●	●	●	●
32. Staff-child interactions	✓	●	●	●	●	●
33. Interactions among children	✓	●	●	●	●	●
VI. Program Structure						
34. Schedule	✓	●	●	●	●	●
35. Free play	✓	●	●	●	●	●
36. Group time	✓	●	●	●	●	●
37. Provisions for children with disabilities	✓	●	●	●	●	●
VII. Parents and Staff						
38. Provisions for parents	✗					
39. Provisions for personal needs of staff	✗					
40. Provisions for professional needs of staff	✗					
41. Staff interaction and cooperation	✓	●	●	●	●	●
42. Supervision and evaluation of staff	✓	●	●	●	●	●
43. Opportunities for professional growth	✗					

Code: ✓ = yes

✗ = no

🕒 = sometimes or usually relevant, depending on the aims of the session

● = used as an indicator during that particular observation

Appendix 4
Observation schedule for the Parent and Baby Group

Observation schedule – Parent and Baby Group

Setting	Space and furnishings, room layout
Resources	Availability, quality and usage
Structure of the session	Activities, routines, focus and delivery of support
Staff	Role in session, interaction between staff, interaction with parents/carers and children
Clients	Number of parents/carers and children present, interaction between parents, interaction with babies, reactions to session, levels of participation