

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Background and rationale

'Community involvement' has been central to Government thinking since 1997 (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005). Sure Start is considered to be an example of a Government initiative that has particularly embraced the notion of 'community involvement' (Eisenstadt, 2002). The terms 'community involvement' and 'community participation' are used interchangeably within the literature (Naidoo and Wills, 1998). The term 'community involvement' will be utilised throughout this dissertation. The meanings of these concepts are widely debated (Anderson, Shepherd & Sailsbury, 2005), as indeed is the notion of 'community' itself (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004). Furthermore, Government policy has often been criticised for being vague with regard to the meaning of the 'community involvement' approach to which it claims to adhere to (Anderson et al., 2005). Some definitions have stipulated that 'community involvement' is simply participation of the 'community' in the formal processes of policy formation and implementation (Naidoo and Wills, 2000). Other definitions are less precise and simply refer to it as an exercise of 'popular agency' for the intention of 'community development' (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Importantly, the term 'community development' is also ambiguous and requires clarification. 'Community involvement' approaches are often criticised for only incorporating consultation (Naidoo and Wills, 1998). Models of 'community involvement' have been produced, which present a hierarchical representation of the methods of 'involving the community', according to the extent to which they are deemed to embrace the 'true' meaning of the term (Arnstein, 1969). However, these models have

been criticised for over simplifying the concept of 'community involvement' (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005). Consequently, models which attempt to illustrate the complexity of the relationships within 'community involvement' have been offered (Ball, 1994). To this end, Ball's (1994) model highlights the importance of the partnership between professionals and parents/service users and criticises hierarchical models for assuming that parents/service users should not be treated as equal to professionals.

As previously noted, 'community involvement' is a key aspect of the wider 'community development' agenda which encompasses 'communities' assessing needs, developing the confidence to address these needs, obtaining necessary resources and consequently meeting their identified objectives (Naidoo and Wills, 2000). 'Involving' the 'community' in various initiatives is high on the Government's political agenda (Marrow and Malin, 2004). Currently, 'community involvement' is considered to assist in two key political agendas; namely the improvement of the 'health' services (Baggot, Allsop and Jones, 2005), and the promotion of social inclusion, particularly amongst marginalised groups (Barr, 2003). Various examples of 'community involvement' being used to contribute to these agendas are discussed within the literature review.

The Sure Start scheme was established to work towards both of these wider political agendas (Glass, 1999). More specifically, Sure Start is the Government's initiative which claims to deliver the best start in life for every child by amalgamating early education, childcare, health and family support

(Sure Start, 2005b). Sure Start was deemed to be a key aspect of the Labour Government's strategy to end child poverty by 2020 (Marrow and Malin, 2004). The initial idea for Sure Start emerged from the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review conducted in 1997 (Glass, 1999). The findings suggested that current services were failing those with the most significant needs (Glass, 1999). Consequently, Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) were established within the geographical areas in England deemed to be the most deprived (Glass, 1999). These were chosen using the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation plus two extra indicators of low birth weight and teenage pregnancy (Glass, 1999). SSLPs professed aim was to break the cycle of child poverty by providing support to families when children are very young before problems are perceived to become especially complicated and therefore difficult to solve (Blunkett and Cooper, 2000). This aim was specified because research had suggested that early disadvantage is linked with later negative effects on 'health' (Houston, 2003). SSLPs have focussed on long term results such as reducing criminal behaviour, increasing educational performance, lowering unemployment and reducing teenage pregnancy (Houston, 2003). At their peak, there were 524 SSLPs in operation (Sure Start, 2005c). At the time of writing, SSLPs were undergoing changes. These transformations were outlined in the Government's ten year childcare strategy; the key aspect of which is the development of Children's Centres to effectively replace SSLPs (Sure Start, 2005d). The reported aim of these Children's Centres is to provide good quality integrated services for children (Sure Start, 2005d). The professed long-term goal is the provision of

a Children's Centre for 'every community' (2005c). The services will therefore not be limited to those who are considered to be deprived.

Glass (1999) originally stated that the 'locally led' nature of SSLPs would be key to their success. Indeed, Eisenstadt, the director of the Sure Start Unit, argues that "the involvement of local parents and carers in the design, management and delivery" is "probably the key principle" of SSLPs (Eisenstadt, 2002, p. 3). In spite of the putative importance of 'parental/community involvement' within the blueprint of SSLPs, the form that it is perceived to take and the difference it is perceived to make has only been explored to a limited degree. Studies have concentrated on the more formal mechanisms of 'community involvement', namely; Management Boards and Parents' Forums (Marrow and Malin, 2004; Hassan, Spencer and Hogard, 2006; Briant, 2004; Lomas and Hannon, 2005; Johnson, 2004). This has been the key impetus for this research, which has encompassed a broader exploration of 'community involvement' within SSLPs. The reported priority of 'community involvement' within SSLPs suggests it is important to gain as full an understanding as possible of the phenomenon. This will assist staff members to successfully address the issue of 'involving the community' within SSLPs in the most effective and appropriate manner. The anticipated outcome of such an exploration is fundamentally improved services for families.

Concerns have been expressed regarding the implications of the transition to Children's Centres for 'community involvement'. More specifically, these

concerns have related to the shift away from a partnership model, with parent led Management Boards, to one in which Local Authorities have a more central role (Glass, 2005). Glass (2005) is concerned that this will result in less 'community involvement' and may consequently affect the success of the scheme. Hodge (2005) focuses on the argument that Local Authorities will be better placed to facilitate 'community involvement' than Central Government. However, the issue of concern is the diminished 'involvement' of the 'community' that may accompany this transition (Glass, 2005). A further concern is the transformation of policy focus, embodied within the transition of SSLPs to Children's Centres, from child development to childcare, of which the 'community' do not appear to have been consulted on (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005). Although the concerns of political commentators and academics have been expressed regarding this transformation, importantly, the perceptions of staff members and service users have not been explored. Furthermore, as changes are inevitably occurring, it may be considered to be a key time for establishing which aspects of the SSLPs need to remain the same and which need to alter with regard to 'community involvement'. The guidance for the implementation of Children's Centres states that "when local authorities are planning Children's Centres and before decisions are taken they must...ensure the views of children, parent/carers and families are valued and taken into account in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services" (Sure Start 2005c, p. 5). At the time of writing, this is the extent of the guidance for 'involving the community' within Children's Centres, which appears to focus solely on consultation as a means of 'community involvement'.

The researcher's professional role in conducting evaluation research commissioned by specific SSLPs has provided further impetus for completing this research. Firstly, anecdotally, staff members within various SSLPs have frequently referred to, what they perceived to be, a unique approach of SSLPs towards 'community involvement'. This was coupled with service users frequently and passionately discussing their satisfaction with the means in which SSLPs operate. It was of interest to understand these issues and any perceived relationship between them. Secondly, research into SSLPs has tended to be focussed on particular services delivered under the umbrella of SSLPs (Lloyd and Raftery, 2006). This may be perceived to have resulted in a fragmented picture of what the essence of SSLPs is. It is anticipated that this research will therefore assist in developing a fuller understanding of the approach adopted by SSLPs, through exploring the theme of 'community involvement', which theoretically cuts across all services.

2. Aims and objectives of the research

The aim of the research was to explore the perceptions of staff members and service users concerning the meanings, understandings, processes and outcomes of 'community involvement' within SSLPs.

Consequently the objectives of the research were to explore the following research questions;

- What form is 'community involvement' within SSLPs perceived to take?

- What difference is 'community involvement' within SSLPs perceived to make?

3. Context of the research

This research was a case study of a specific SSLP in the North West of England. The SSLP in question was a sixth wave programme proposed in December 2001 (SSLP, n.d.). The programme area is reportedly an area of high transience and high unemployment (SSLP, n.d.). The area was designated a SSLP because it ranked 54th on the index of multiple deprivation data and 69th on the index of child poverty (SSLP, n.d.). The area is also part of the Objective One Economic Social Fund (ESF) programme (SSLP, n.d.). A specific local aim of the programme from the onset was to access the so called 'hard to reach' families who, it is alleged, often feel excluded from mainstream services (Sure Start, n.d.).

4. Limitations of the study

Although the research has attempted to provide an insight into the impact of 'community involvement' within SSLPs, the study is, purposefully, limited to the perceptions of participants. These were explored via focus groups. The research did not attempt to illustrate links between aspects of 'community involvement' and outcomes for families. This is due to the problematic nature of attempting to make such correlations and the fact that the outcomes for SSLP are deemed to be long term (Glass, 1999). Furthermore, the research was limited to the perceptions of those who actually utilise the services and did not attempt to solicit the opinions of non-service users. It was anticipated

that, through a deeper understanding of the perceptions of those that do use the service, explanations for why some families don't would be explored. Finally, the research was fundamentally a case study, it is therefore not anticipated that all findings may be generalisable to all other SSLPs and/or similar initiatives. However, it was considered that a certain level of theoretical generalisation could take place, in accordance with guidance provided on case study research (Yin, 1994).

5. Structure of the dissertation

Following on from this introduction, the literature review in chapter two outlines the current body of knowledge related to the research subject. This includes a critical analysis of the theories, concepts and models related to 'community involvement' within SSLPs and a discussion of their relevance to this research. In addition, the previous methodologies and methods utilised within similar studies are explored and critically analysed. Chapter three details the research strategy, study design and data generation methods adopted for this research and provides an explanation for why these were deemed appropriate. Furthermore, the research protocol is outlined to allow readers to accurately understand the processes that occurred. Methods of data analysis utilised are also described and justified. Importantly, this chapter also includes a detailed analysis of the ethical issues considered within this research. Chapter four presents the findings of the research. Included within, are the frequencies of individuals who participated in each focus group, a diagrammatic representation of findings and a detailed description of the findings using quotes as illustrative examples. The final

chapter concludes from and discusses the research findings. This encompasses, a conclusion, a comparison of the findings to pre-existing literature, a discussion of the limitations and an evaluation using specific criteria appropriate for qualitative research. In light of these issues, the chapter outlines suggestions for further research. A final statement summarises the key aspects of the research.

6. Summary

In summary, 'community involvement' is a key aspect of the wider 'community development' agenda (Naidoo and Wills, 2000). It is, however, an ambiguous notion that requires unpacking (Anderson et al., 2005). 'Community involvement' is considered to be a vital aspect of SSLPs (Eisenstadt, 2002). Anecdotal evidence has suggested that staff members perceive 'community involvement' within SSLPs to be unique and service users to highly value their relationships with staff members. However, explorations of 'community involvement' within SSLPs have focused on formal mechanisms such as Management Boards and Parents' Forums (Marrow and Malin, 2004; Hassan, Spencer and Hogard, 2006; Briant, 2004; Lomas and Hannon, 2005; Johnson, 2004). Indeed even Glass's (2005) criticisms of the transition to Children's Centres and the impact on 'community involvement' focuses on the abolition of these Boards. Furthermore, evaluations have tended to concentrate on specific services and have not explored the approach of SSLPs more broadly (Lloyd and Raferty, 2006). A broader exploration of 'community involvement' was therefore considered to be important. At a local level (i.e. within the specific

SSLP in question), the rationale for this broader exploration was to facilitate a more in depth understanding of which approaches employed are perceived to be successful and which require improvement. The high level of importance placed on 'community involvement' within various initiatives (Marrow and Malin, 2004) suggests this research also has significant implications for policy concerning 'community involvement' at a national level. This research is particularly timely to influence the transition to Children's Centres. Further impetus for this research was provided by the lack of guidance with regard to Children's Centres and 'community involvement'; the concerns expressed regarding this matter and the lack of exploration into service users and staff members' perceptions of this issue. The findings of this research may therefore assist in improving services for families at a local and national level. In terms of academia, the lack of agreement over what the concept 'community involvement' incorporates increases the value of exploring the meanings, experiences and implications of it within the contexts of SSLPs. This qualitative exploration was conducted via focus groups with service users and staff members at a specific SSLP in the North West of England.