

**'The complexities of 'community involvement'
in Sure Start Local Programmes: a case study'**

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Declaration

The work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or programme.

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Abstract

Sure Start is a Government's scheme, the professed aim of which is to provide a positive commencement to life for children through the integration of early education, childcare, health and family support (Sure Start, 2005b). Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) were considered to be a fundamental aspect of this agenda (Sure Start 2005b). At the time of writing, SSLPs were transforming into Children's Centres (Glass, 2005). Strikingly, it has been claimed that the 'involvement' of the 'community', is the fundamental principle of SSLPs (Eisenstadt, 2002). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that SSLPs are considered to have a relatively unique approach to 'community involvement'. However, what 'community involvement' in SSLPs means in practice is largely unreported. Markedly, research into this area has concentrated on the formal mechanisms of 'community involvement' such as Management Boards and Parents' Forums (Marrow and Malin, 2004; Hassan, Spencer and Hogard, 2006; Briant, 2004; Lomas and Hannon, 2005 and Johnson, 2004). Consequently, this research aimed to explore 'community involvement' across SSLPs more broadly in order to address this identified gap in the literature. This research was fundamentally a case study of a particular SSLP. It utilised focus groups, with both service users and staff members, as a method of data generation. Additionally, it adopted the fundamental principles of a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

The key finding of this research was that both staff and service users perceived the fundamental aspect of 'community involvement' to be the form of relationship developed between them. In particular, the informal nature of this relationship was stressed and highly valued. Thus, it may be considered essential that staff within Children's Centres develop such informal relationships with service users in order for families to access services in the first instance and for the services to be successful in meeting outcomes. In addition, staff within other initiatives and perhaps statutory services could benefit from the development of such informal relationships. A further implication of the high value placed on these informal relationships, is that the mode of measuring 'community involvement' within SSLPs should be altered. A move from measuring the number of 'community' representatives on the Management Board to a more exploratory investigation of the perceived quality of staff-service user relationships would be more useful and relevant.

Other findings from this research should be carefully considered for the transition to Children's Centres and perhaps beyond. Areas for potential improvement include the extent to which the 'same few faces' are 'involved' and service users being more thoroughly informed regarding policy changes. More positive aspects of SSLPs which could be taken forward to Children's Centres include, the means of accessing the so called 'hard to reach' through Family Partnership Workers, outreach services, and free services and innovative informal volunteering opportunities, including one off activities and simply 'mucking in'. In addition, there were noticeable differences in the perceptions of different groups of staff members regarding the priority placed on 'community involvement' which should be explored further.