



Sure Start case: 'keeping the essence' evolving into a Children's Centre

Introduction: setting the scene

Sure Start is a national government programme set up in 1998 aiming to 'deliver the best start in life for every child' ([Sure Start Web Site](#)). It brings together, early education, childcare, health and family support. Beginning with targeted neighbourhood-based Sure Start programmes funded by the Department of Health, the scheme was extended in 2005/06 to cover the whole country, based on Children's Centres funded through local authorities.

Local Sure Start programmes resulted from bids from partnerships which included voluntary and statutory organisations. They vary from one building with a range of facilities for parents and children to a 'virtual' centre using a range of buildings and services across a locality.

The mapping [\[see diagram ppt version\]](#) or [pdf version](#) of this case study shows:

- a) relations at the start of the Sure Start project
- b) how issues over capital funds for building work affected these
- c) how the shift to a Children's centre changed relationships

Stories in the Sure Start case

[Hope was the Programme Director](#) when this Sure Start programme was set up. In the course of this research, she moved to another job. She lives locally

[Della is a mother](#) who has been involved on the Parents' Forum and then the Executive, and her daughter Charisse

[Rachel is Chair of this Sure Start](#), also a local mother

[Lydia is the current Co-Ordinator](#), also a local mother

[Mary is the Head of the Nursery School](#), run by the borough Education Department

[Issues in these stories](#)

Hope's story

Hope was Programme Director from project's start. She sums up how the Sure Start project felt to her:

'A very political active partnership in a geographical area. A lot of fun over the years The practitioners and also the parents have these relationships that go outside the organisations People telling people how it is and talking outside about things they don't talk about inside .. relationships outside organisation, networks of trust and collaboration that go outside the organisation. Practitioners might go out for a drink from a whole range of organisations. Projects may happen organically, yet there are some strongholds within the organisation where you can bet your life there will be some sabotage or it feels like.'

How it all began...

' I came to the partnership group as someone coming for funding; ...not as anyone involved in the partnership. [It] was a working group initially that was trying to enable Sure Start to send a proposal to central government ... They needed to pull together all the partners. It wasn't a formed partnership. I came in the middle [when it was] trying to form itself and ended up applying to do the Sure Start plan. I ended up... trying to do a proposal for government for a Sure Start programme.



'It seemed that there was quite a strong lead from the statutory organisations for a Sure Start to happen. All possible people in the area were invited to be part of this partnership. There were some key players - it was obvious when you came in who had the strong voices ... and who were the ones that didn't. The thing that brought them all together was that this particular area had limited resources and so here was an opportunity to have huge financial resource into an area that had been starved of resources for quite a long time, had complex problems. Everyone was highly motivated to be involved... My other impression as I took on writing this proposal was that all sorts of project proposals were coming in, there was a deadline, but there were some agencies that had the power to extend the deadline without making sure every else got the same opportunity. So some of the voluntary sector were having to stick to a deadline... and ..some of the statutory organisations extending that deadline. ...They would come in with 5 or 8 proposals.. very difficult to actually get them to see that that was unfair and we needed some equity.

'However the initial lead organisation [the PCT] withdrew as soon as the project was agreed

by the Sure Start Unit. So I had to take over the lead. But they withdrew in such a way that if there were any complexities, they would not be there as a support base. Quite difficult when you are talking about a partnership of 20 organisations with very different cultures and very different perspectives and motivations. The second agency which was the accountable agency (because [Sure Start] was not constituted so it had to piggy back on an accountable body) was going through so much structural change that we lost some champions within the first year. So in terms of getting the programme to go along what we believed to be a common vision and values and joint agreements, it was quite difficult. 'In the midst of that,.. we had to decide on a capital projects, you had a capital budget. You had to decide in time for the project to be approved by government in your initial plan. It wasn't that you could decide after a time. What ended up happening was that two partners decided they were going to choose who benefited from that capital funding. They rang around the group of supporters who would agree to that. ...



'All too fast'

'The biggest point that I want to make about this partnership was that I don't think they were ready for action. It was all happening too fast. People were not empowered to make the decisions they

needed to make. The timescales were very tight from government, in terms of all the different organisations involved. There was no parent voice at this point. There two significant groups that hadn't even been thought of: asylum seekers and refugee communities and the traveller group which is significant in our area. They were excluded. There was a general sense of whoever had the loudest voice propelled everyone into action and there were people who were key players in driving things who would then pull away.

'All of this had quite an effect on governance. The statutory organisations might know more about governance than some of our voluntary sector partners but they are the people that were left in the end and our users have much more say now than they ever did when we started. They've kept going and so have some of our voluntary sector partners. In terms of our statutory sector partners, there was so much restructuring and change they had to look after their own house before the needs of the programme.... Something was then lost about early intervention and prevention. Sure Start could have helped the statutory partners to avoid the really serious problems that some of our children and families were experiencing, by doing some of that early intervention/prevention work. We weren't allowed to engage with them because they did not have the capacity to engage with us. Some of our very serious families where they might be at risk could have been caught a lot earlier if we had had that collaboration. We found other ways of doing that. It was certainly demanding. I

think that [some] people felt they did not need to change and Sure Start was all about changing and about finding new ways of doing things and giving parents a say in how the change happened - parents and children I hasten to add.

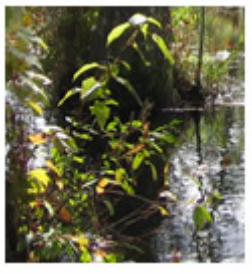


Engaging parents

'After the first year we needed to change certain things. Some people were being actively excluded, or had not been reached out to.

We had appointed different practitioners particularly to reach into communities. Some of the change happened by a kind of joint agreement. Within the structure of Sure Start we tried to look the governance and structure, we decided at every point we would have a good mix of all the people that were key stakeholders. We all worked towards that aim. Given some of our statutory partners were not really engaged, it gave us the opportunity to explore that a lot more. Myself and our parent development worker connected with the asylum seeking and refugee communities as well as our outreach worker. We knew they did not have the capacity to come to us so we went to them on a regular basis, and brought their issues into decision-making arenas. Similarly with our parents, we ensured that 50% of our decision-making body were parents, and we would look at the diversity within that group.

'It was a bit of an uphill struggle because this community had been let down for such a long time that there was no trust. So we built a lot of trust through very community-based events and approaches. So we would have crèches, and vouchers to say thank you for coming. We would organise meals together where the practitioners and the parents would work on things together. I think those approaches really helped. We also moved from upstairs premises totally inaccessible for families with prams to a unit that our chair, a parent, helped to push through. This was a shopfront unit, very central in the area, so parents could walk in. We created what I call a 'front room' approach - we had the resources to have lovely Ikea sofas and nice tables and a crèche and a conference room.



Making it happen

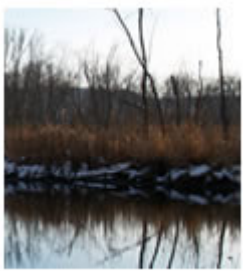
'We had a team that was core to the heart of Sure Start based together. This helped people: they could not only get information but they could see a health visitor, they might be able to see a family support worker, a parent development worker. This particularly helped with reaching out to our dads - who we weren't

reaching initially. We appointed a parent development coordinator who was a dad and who actually was able to reach them.

'Communication was an issue. I remember when I first started ringing up parents who were going to come and help us. I rang at 9 and they were still in bed. I... oh my goodness... I'm so sorry I've woken you up. I realised that something like 10 o'clock is a good time. People's lives aren't organised according to filofax diaries. So now one of the best ways of communicating with our parents is through text. The parents' forum has thrived and is very exercised in attending meetings. There's a culture, just the day before I will text them: look forward to seeing you tomorrow at such and such time. They will text me back. In between they will text me about issues .. So it's not necessary always long conversations. People look for a very personal approach. I try to make myself available. It's not been a hierarchical structure; it's been a flat structure so people can tell me things if they want to. I also work to remember things that are important to individuals.

'But we started off with a lot of people who knew how to use services getting connected in and starting to speak on behalf of those who did not speak for themselves. But over time that whole group has changed, partly because the initial group began to realise that they needed to do something about actually engaging those people themselves. People started to bring someone that they met at the school gate, or someone from next door. It all started very generically through events, eventually through people wanting to join the parents' forum and wanting to have a voice.

'There were some quick wins. It became obvious that certain services weren't available, we had a resource, we enabled those services to come into being, even for short periods of time. For example, parents said things like 'well actually we don't have a social life. When we come out, we would like to bring our children'. That is quite a different view: if you talk to a middle class group they want to find a baby sitter. The challenge for us all is how we manage childcare. We sat within the accountable body which has its own financial regulations. How do you pay parents for a babysitter? What kind of forms do you have to sign? Do people have to be registered? What we found was that our mainly African and West Indian and white working class communities actually wanted to bring their families with them We ended up doing a whole series of evening events and we've continued to, that they organised and we co-facilitated.



A lot of parents would be volunteers, and something could happen with their kids suddenly and they might have to change. So we had this agreement with a core team and the parents would do it together and we would back them up as a safety net. So we had salsa evenings and an international evening.

'Over time what has happened is that the parents have taken over. I had an executive meeting yesterday and all the parents were there and three of our statutory partners weren't. This then means some of the decisions reflect what our users think. Actually a partnership should be about perceived and felt needs. Practitioners have a perception of what needs to happen as much as parents. So it's about that balance really.'

Della's story

Della is a mother who is a member of the Executive, and on the Parents' Forum. She talks about getting involved and it has developed for her:

'My health visitor told me about Sure Start, I signed some forms to go on the mailing list; I was given a book bag and things for my daughter. I didn't think anything of it. Then I went to a session at the library. It was great fun. She got to mix with other babies; I got to meet other parents. I then started to get involved from there. I went to the soft play area and I got to meet the coordinator for kid's activities and got to know him. It really changed my life. A year or two into all that I became very ill. Someone spoke on my behalf so that I could have a place in a nursery close by. That made me get involved. Then I got on the Parents' Forum. They could see I was a person who was used to working, but after I was ill I tried to go back to work. They did not allow me to. It was hard to get back into work. I would have got quite depressed. I've never been one for sitting at home watching daytime TV. I looked forward to the Sure Start events and I was doing what I liked doing which was talking a lot.

'Another mother and I became good friends. She's a bit shy, like a younger sister, someone to rely on. For birthdays, I'd ask her and her children over. It's been good. I got asked to be put on the committee of the Parents' Forum. Parents' Forum is a group who have come together and decide to put some thing back in the community, it's voluntary. The office funds the majority of it. For example I bought the Easter eggs. I brought back the receipt. They're very trusting. We have been here for a while. There are about 15 of us. It enabled us to make choices of things for the parents in the area. What do I know that I want and what have other parents told me that they want? It meets once a month. If we've got an event coming up, or we're holding a stall, coming close to the time, we might have a meeting every other week. I have to do a bit of shopping for it, and make sure I talk to the ladies about what they want. We also do mail outs to people on the database.

'The Programme Director asked me to go on the Exec. It is little bit more strict and paper work and facts and figures. We were given information about up and coming things that are happening. For example the Children's Centre - what's happening, and about the Nursery. Finance people come and talk about facts and figures and how much we've got left. We take decisions. We get to know there is over or underspend. We give our ideas and reasons, ways to spend underspend, including the capital. The core people they already know what they want to do, they take it to the committee and we say yea or nay. About the underspend, there was a little bit of banter. Someone wanted some money for their staff to go on training to pay for cover staff. Other schools cope, they rotate their staff. We decided to share it out between the different nurseries and [nursery] schools in the area in our catchment area at present. We don't have a stipulated catchment area, we ask people up there, they can't tell us, so it is really is our discretion. We decide on the catchment area.

The move to Children's Centres

'It's very messy. We're trying to explain to people, but we're not very sure on it ourselves. It will be all the services that are happening now, but on a bigger scale. Normally there would be a designated building for it, people would be able to use the computers, and get information and know about courses. But because we don't have a building, we are going to be scattered all over the place. Everyone thinks that Sure Start is gone. We are trying to say it has not gone. Before, people outside the area could not attend our groups, or parties, or get mailouts. Now it's widened, anyone in this area can be on our mailing lists.

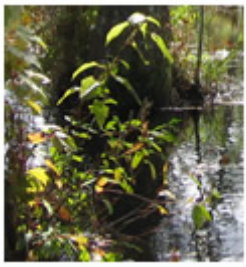


'The staff here don't know if they will have a job. They might not have any staff left. Now the council will hold the money. They will have to go to them every time when they need something Till now, they've been able to spend the money and liaised with the Council to make sure. I think the Exec and the staff will go on running it. It will be the best thing. The council don't know what we do. We thought they might abolish the Parents' Forum - they might have thought we aren't significant enough. The Programme Director fought hard to retain the Parents' Forum and to make sure we remained an Executive Board and one of us went to the meetings to represent the Parents' Forum . You can have a chart, you can have a hierarchy, they can be up there and we're down here but we are the people who matter. If we aren't there- the parents and the children - this wouldn't exist. It's really important to keep going. We've only just begun. We're thinking about having some kind of launch or some kind of party. Just to let people know it's got a new name but it's still here.

'Getting down and dirty'

'The nursery school head is the head of all of it really. At first, we all just thought that being the head of any school has to be a big deal, a lot of work. We are all very apprehensive. She must have a lot to do anyway. Plus she's not always been the most approachable person. You really need somebody that is very approachable, fun-loving, happy, plugging information constantly, really into it. She is good at her job, but maybe somebody like the Programme director if she stayed on. Because she's gets down and dirty, she's involved with everything. I just feel that when you are in that position you have to be able to. But the head is not really good at getting in there. The Programme Director who left - she's someone you wouldn't even know that she was the Director because she blends in extremely well. But it's very apparent that Mary is a head. Yes I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that. Not many people make me feel that they're up there and I'm down there. She has airs and graces about her that makes me feel that way. I don't think that's a good thing for this environment. I get on with her. But you really need not to feel intimidated in any way.

'I can see it's not everybody that can gell with everyone, or any colour person, to be out there. You've got different classes in this area. It is a really big thing she's taken on. If she's going to do it, she should do that solely, rather than be head of the school and that as well. Because we haven't got a building, it is possible for her just to work from there. She's in meetings all the time, her whole life is in meetings. I just wonder when does she find time for the in-between things. It's been quite nice. she's come to the parents' forum to find out what's happening. She couldn't really say much, I thought she couldn't because she doesn't know much.



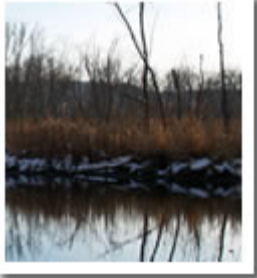
'Men are such a different species'

'One of our main objectives is get fathers involved. I went to a conference a few months, in this other area, they have a parents' forum for fathers. They have different needs from us. We have 2 males that made a contribution. Men are such a different species.

It hasn't been easy. We've been told that if we hang around the job centre - that's what they did. We've had things for fathers, we've asked people with partners. It's a child setting, so they think it's just a bunch of women there.

'Different classes - they're all welcomed. We have got different groups - single parents, people that are working maybe part time, we have not got any asylum seekers, but we've got people who maybe don't speak very good English - they come in for classes. What we are missing the most is teenage parents. There's a young lady we hope will link us up with more people. We stop people on the bus sometimes. We tell them about Sure Start. You can guess

when someone has a need for something - kids getting on their nerves. There's a hairdresser on my road. I can see this poor 2 year old sitting on her own. I say [to the mum], 'Pop over spend an hour of your break. He's bored and he needs stimulation'. [We have] working class people and people on benefit. A lot of people at home need it because they have more time. Working mothers use it in holidays.



Sure Start for both mothers and children

'It's for both mothers and children - a mother might come to bring their child, they're also meeting people, getting a chance to off-load their problems, having a general chit chat. We are trying to do things for parents. We ask the parents if there is anything you would like to do - no-one's come back as yet. In my area there aren't

any playgroups. I have got someone NNEB and CRB checked to work with me. I got involved because I am a tenant. I'll be a volunteer, until I get a job of my own. It's positive to get a job. But there's a lot of people out there, there aren't many after school clubs. The government is pressurising people - mothers have told me they have to go for interviews at the Job Centre Plus: Why aren't you back at work?'

Della's daughter, Charisse

Charisse talks about what Sure Start means for her:

'My best friends at Sure Start were Jamal and Jenny. I like the parties at Sure Start... We have cakes. At Easter we got chocolate Easter eggs and I had my hand painted. It was a heart on my hand. It's gone now. There were balloons.'

Rachel's story

Rachel is a local parent who is the Chair of the Sure Start project. She talks about how she got involved:

'I was involved in a Willow Project - it's a playgroup among other things - as a parent. They were looking for a parent to chair the [Sure Start]partnership. My three eldest children went there. I wasn't sure what I was being asked to do. They were having a big capital development financed through Sure Start. I thought that I was asked to be involved in the committee that was organising that. Actually I was being asked to chair the partnership. That was quite scary. A slight misinterpretation on my part! That was in 2001. I was just pregnant with my fourth child.

I had a very very brief career in management in the NHS on the fast track management

scheme for graduates. I was at least comfortable around some of the jargon and the formality about meetings and health professionals. Otherwise it would have been a very ambitious thing to ask someone to do. It would be very difficult for someone who did not have that. Not that there aren't parents who could have done the job, but it would have been more of a gradual process for them to get to grips with it. I've been involved since the beginning of it really happening, not the initial consultation phase. It was Sure Start, it had a budget, it had largely commissioned the services for the first year. It had an Executive. I swooped in and was presented as the chair of that.'



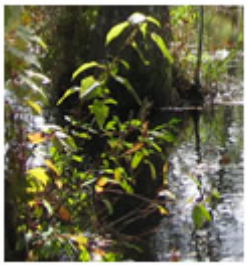
'An utter fiasco' over a new building

'At the beginning it was a very positive picture, a lot of excitement around. People could see the possibilities just having the resources. We were looking at doing two quite big capital developments that would really have improved services. The initial budget for the Willow Project was about half a million, ...a complete rebuild. This was a partnership bid. The [faith organisation] owned the building and the land. They were going to continue to own it, but handing it over to be used entirely for Sure Start. There was money from Sure Start Programme, there was some money from national Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative through local authorities. The other [financial partner] was the housing association - there were going to be two or three flats that would be affordable accommodation for key workers.



'It was an utter fiasco. We used quite a lot of PCT services so their capital manager was to oversee this capital development. I think they were being paid to do it. One of their staff project managed the rebuilding and the contractors, who were using a slightly innovative building technique called 'rammed earth'. One terrible wet weekend the contractors went home leaving walls unprotected. It rained more than it had rained ever. They were ruined. That is when the trouble began. The project manager was seriously overworked, didn't really have the capacity to manage the project. The contractor's surveyors were saying, 'It's not a problem, it's not a load-bearing wall'. The relationships between the PCT guy, the Willow Project and the contractors began to break down. The Willow Project weren't happy with progress. They started to involve their own surveyors. They were asking for work to be halted. The PCT project manager was coming to our meetings and saying in effect the Willow Project are kicking up a fuss; it's not a problem. We believed him. We never had any direct contact with the contractors. My impression as the chair was we were being told everything was fine and so we carried on. This degenerated to a point where then the lawyers got involved. The Willow Project was very

unhappy and involved quite heavy weight lawyers. We ended up with a process of expert determination which cost everyone an absolute fortune. The expert determiners said, 'These walls aren't good enough. The contractors need to be brought back to sort them out'. It never got as far as being used. It's probably 3 years that this has been going on. It's still not finished. In truth, that is a partnership that really was never a partnership. The [faith organisation] saw an opportunity to get their building rebuilt. They saw a pot of money. We saw a convenient building. We were never really all on the same side. The Willow Project saw themselves as a client of ours, without really wanting to be very responsible to us. Their attitude was almost like - 'we've bought a building off you and now it's not here. As Sure Start you're not coming up with the goods.' They blamed us for it. It was very nasty and very adversarial and difficult. I wasn't in some of the more difficult meetings. The Willow Project swayed the housing association into their camp as well. On the other side was us and the PCT. Sure Start Unit got involved in the end, they weren't keen. But Sure Start Unit was supplying the money and wanted to know what was going on. It came in to bang heads together. It wasn't managing the process at all. The Willow Project were very angry. They had been allowed meanwhile to use another site down the road in the local church for their playgroup; it's fairly unsuitable but is where they are now stuck.



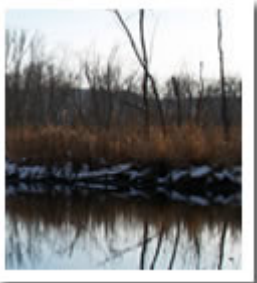
Struggle for control

'The finished centre would have been all day day-care, a meeting place, health visitors were hoping that they would be able to go in and out of there. It was going to be quite a big project. The centre would have been managed day to day by the Willow Project, not by Sure Start. That was a bone of contention. There was always a

slight struggle for control, the roots of which are that for many years, the Willow Project were quite a big player politically and in the community. They had been used to a culture of knowing the right people. Roberta who runs the Project is quite a big personality. She was on most local consultations. She knew local councillors, was well known by parents. She was a player in this area. When Sure Start came in they were really threatening her turf. There was a time when they had a playgroup, parent and children activities, arts workshops for women, a youth group. The [faith organisation] had a remote involvement but [religion was not an issue]. In the manner of lots of local organisations, hand to mouth, they saw [Sure Start as] another pot of money. Most of their wrath was directed as us rather than the PCT, the Programme Director in particular. She had a very, very hard time. The relationship between the Programme Director and Roberta was already slightly difficult, even before this went wrong. It was more to do with Roberta feeling threatened by the new kid on the

block and the Programme Director feeling the need to assert herself and being quite emotional and therefore things sometimes getting more heated than they needed to be. For me it was very difficult, because my whole link had come through the Willow Project. Then my loyalties were with Sure Start, so it was sad.

'The minute things started to go wrong, there was no attempt to say, 'Right, we're all in this together - how do we find a way out?' The blame game started absolutely immediately. No attempt on their part. We were very conciliatory all the time. Before the first brick was laid there had already been a jostling over how much control Sure Start could expect for their money. That came from a culture of these organisations - you get your pot of money wherever the latest government initiative is, generally they've taken the money and then been left to get on with it. They were not used to a culture of being accountable. We would have been running services from there. When we realised that was not going to happen, we got hold of this shop site and started afresh. This site was never in the original plan. So that was already quite unpopular. The plan was for a building run by the Willow Project and running some of the facilities. We had a defined percentage of time and space in that building, which really began the tussle.



'We should have pulled out'

'The lesson is when that was already difficult, already a battle, we should have pulled out. We should have said this is not a genuine partnership. This is not a constructive relationship. We carried on because we didn't see any alternative. There was other capital money set aside for another development. For different reasons it

was never going to happen. That development was dependent on a demolition [of council property] that was clearly not going to happen. We took that money and established this [shop site], leased and we pay rent. We used some of the capital to turn it into what it is now. We were 2 years in before it had really gone wrong.

The Children's Centre

'To be honest, we have gone into the Children's Centre in slightly the same spirit. If we don't get a Children's Centre in this area, everything we've built is going to disappear. There is no future for Sure Start in this area unless it becomes a Children's Centre as that's where government money is going. We looked around to see the best thing that we can cobble together and that is what we have used. We are based at the Nursery School with the head and the Nursery at the Community Centre and here at the moment. There are the 3 sites.

So we don't have one building where everything, all the services are coming together. It's a cobbled together arrangement which is as good as the people who manage it.

'As a partnership it has more potential than the partnership with the Willow Project ever had. I suspect there is possible tension between the Nursery School and the community Nursery. The Nursery School is established & well resourced, a head good at what she does. The Nursery is a much more community based, parent-led, less well resourced but none the less dearly loved. The tensions from the head's point of view - she has become responsible. As head of the Children's Centre, she bears professional responsibility for what goes on in this other place which she doesn't actually have much control over. She feels understandably nervous about it. From the Nursery point of view, they are bumbling along, actually doing it very well; suddenly they've got someone coming in from on high. That relationship needs quite good management. I think it needs an honest broker but it's quite difficult. That will be one of the bits of the new Programme Director's job that will be most difficult for her to do. She has a history as a nursery school parent. She feels strongly about getting it wrong, how to manage that...

'Our local authority has no idea - people don't know if their jobs are coming to an end, chaos about Sure Start - no-one knows. Everyone is supposed to be paid and managed by the education department not the PCT. There is central commissioning of all the services going on now. There is a centralisation of what has been a locally based programme. No one knows what is going on or what services will be there. A very elusive character is supposed to be in charge, though they are now beginning to employ people. It's hard to say what a Children's Centre will look like. It might become more about the experience of children. But also the Parent Development Worker is a statutory requirement.



'Hard to reach'

'In our programme we have quite a representative group of parents, although it is crucially missing dads, teenage parents and working parents for all the practical reasons. In terms of ethnic mix of parents in our area, that is really good. I am going to a borough wide meeting with 3 other parents - one is Thai, one is Black British, one is Egyptian. The issue of gay or lesbian parents hasn't come up. If it had had come up, it would never have been a barrier, but I wouldn't necessarily know.

'There was a point when a lot of nurturing was required to get parents along. But there comes a point when people have to stand on their own two feet. I am being a bit tougher. They are very keen to stay in touch with the previous Programme Director. She used to text

the parents for the Parents' Forum, which they were running; they now feel bereft if they don't get a text! I think that is patronising. I see a bunch of incredibly capable women who don't need texting, but now they think they do!

'I had concerns, we have a very large number of parents who are not ready for full-time work. I was very keen to have lots of part time flexible childcare so they could do whatever was right for them: to take college courses and so on. A lot of them didn't want to go to work full-time. [Part of] our mission was to get parents into work. But it feels to me there's been a shift. If it has gone more towards education I am happy.

Role as Chair

'My role has been to champion the cause of parents, making sure we had parents on the Executive. With the programme director, we were always singing from the same hymn sheet, we shared the same values. In truth, a lot of my job has been about being a sounding board for her. It's been about supporting her. Our values were to do with what is best for our local families. How can we get parents involved? How to raise the profile of parents rather than professionals.

My role was to make sure that the conversation that needed to happen happened in our partnership meetings, in our Executive meetings, to ask difficult questions and to not let conflict get out of hand. That was my role. I wasn't a hands-on in the office chair. I let the Programme Director bring to me the issues and let me think about it, and let me support her. If there hadn't been a Programme Director who I trusted, I would have been in a much more difficult position. I'm not honestly sure how I would have handled that, and where I would have gone with it, other than the Sure Start Unit. our relationship is like the civil service and ministers; I've only ever been as good as the briefing I have got. Sometimes I have had to read between the lines. When the Programme Director has been personally involved, I have had to say, 'Let's just calm this down'. I haven't always been led by her. There have been meetings when I haven't been prepared to take the line she did. Ultimately you have to be prepared to take decisions.

Lydia's story

Lydia is currently the Sure Start Coordinator. She talks about how she got involved in Sure Start:

'I was involved as a parent. My youngest daughter was 'born into Sure Start'. I was parent representative on partnership meetings. They were quarterly. That was my first exposure to partnership. These were big meetings. There used to be 3 or 4 of us parents' reps. I

didn't totally get how the partnership worked at that point. I didn't go to every one of them - I had small kids. I didn't get into the hang of it. It would be reviews of services I hadn't used or become part of. It's virtual but real at the same time. I would be meeting with practitioners, health visitors, but others were these professionals that came along and talked about the outcomes of capital projects. It was a bit beyond me. I was used to being in those kinds of situations - I was used to going to present to multi-nationals and things like that - I wasn't intimidated, but I couldn't get my head round it. I would have enjoyed it more if I had. I didn't engage my brain to it - life stage and all that. They were looking for someone to apply for maternity cover for an administration role. I got the job three years ago. I stayed with the programme, I was administration manager, then assistant director and I'm acting now.'



'Sure Start - it's a virtual thing'

'Sure Start facilitates partnership working, it's a virtual thing, an opportunity for practitioners from agencies whose paths would not have crossed in the way that they cross now. Before, they were aware of other people but they never had the forum to share information, knowledge and good practice, to interrogate other practitioners' jobs to see where they might cross over, so that the two halves create a whole in a new virtual way. Not a formalised thing, but two people have created a new mini-service for someone by doing a joint visit. It's speeded up, it's cut out a lot of time-wasting trying to track down people to help you support the family. Lots of different agencies use this as a portal or meeting point either to see clients, or to see clients with another practitioner. They'll know that so and so will be here on a Tuesday, they can flag up an issue with a client. We've got Health and midwifery, CAMHS [Child and Mental Health Services] for example speech and language drop in on a Thursday. A child development worker will be able to speak directly to that practitioner on that day. They won't have to track them down by phone. They will have a fruitful discussion about the best way forward for that child. The right form will be filled out immediately. Things are streamlined.

'Quilting their life in a square'

'The purpose is to get services to meet the needs of parents in areas where the statutory services have not succeeded before; to have the flexibility to try that out. We are not as restricted; we have that flexibility to say, Why not try that this time? For example, we had a drop-in around children's health and fitness. The child development worker had a sports background. Gradually it became just another drop-in, numbers dropped. We were able to bring everyone together who had been involved, to say, what was it set up for? What Sure

Start target were we trying to address? We were able to talk to the parents and see how they perceived it. We were able to re-frame it so it became health and fitness for parents rather than just for children. Now children do exercise with parents rather than the other way round. We were able to address that quickly and say: What was the point? And keep the essence of what we are trying to do. We've done that with some of our life story work and social work support. They identify parents who have issues with the way they were parented, some who have had quite painful experiences. We run a similar group exclusively with women who have experienced domestic violence - group work and craft work, going back to women sitting round working and the session will be around quilting their life in a square. It's down to the practitioners we have, they can say: It's not just this; it's a service that moves with the particular clients we have got.' Those are softer kind of things. We can be just that much more responsive, and keep our ear to the ground just that much more.

'We've been really lucky in this programme. Talking to practitioners that work across programmes, they tell us that we have the one that worked. It's down to the Programme Director that set it up. The style has always been about the partnership. There's not been any dictatorial set up. There's been a soft and inclusive feel to it. The practitioners' feedback is valued more than the managers' feedback. Everyone is very hands on, and have supported each other. All the practitioners really liked each other and wanted to work with each other.



How parents view the partnership

'The parents that are the most engaged see the partnership more. They may have needed more interventions; they have had contact with a wider number of agencies. You see the family support worker,

then you get to know the social worker. Then you may get to know the health visitor who will introduce you to the life story worker, so suddenly the network and the support of these different people who know each other is there - to provide a net to support you. For others who only need access to the drop-ins, they might only use one or two services. They don't see the practitioners as interlinked except when we have an event.

Social services 'conspicuous by their absence'

'We have a part-time social worker. We bought in our social work from the voluntary sector. That member of staff is now part of our core team. She gets supervision from the Willow Project, and does one-on-one work and life story work. Social services are not involved - very conspicuous by their absence. They never referred anybody. We've tried to get them to be represented on the Board; they don't come to the meetings. It's been quite tricky. They would only come along if we funded one of their social workers.



Managing funding and projects

'We monitor for uptake, if there is an issue, it's taken to a sub group and discussed. We do have services that we discontinue because they don't deliver. For example a drug project - it was amicable, they had different ways of working. Another partnership for teenage mothers - they tried lots of different things but there was no take-up, so we had to draw a line under it. Same problem with the centre for asylum seekers, the services were being taken up by families from way outside our area. This year we have funded their drop-in service - that's generic for anyone in the borough. There are 7 Sure Starts in the borough. Informally it's happened. It's recognising that there is a need, our boundaries don't necessarily fit. The Programme Directors have been vociferous in saying there is a need to support those families, ensure it is included in borough wide commissioning. You have to be a bit more creative in working out those services.

Central targets matched to local need - 'there are some which are bonkers'

'The budget is broken down to reflect national targets. Things like community involvement, crime, parental participation, increasing the number of women breastfeeding. The targets are fine, although there are some which are bonkers. For example the smoking cessation targets. How many women give up when they book up - who will tell the truth on that with the social stigma about smoking when having a baby? How you collect that data is mindblowing. We cover 3 electoral wards; you have to do this bizarre percentage. We have got 850 families in our area. You are basing that on 2001 census and there are 30% population moves per year. One third of the families move each year, whether they move locally, or away, and there is the estate that is being moved out. Some of the targets are OK - how many families are receiving services, we got the data base in 2005. My big moan is the [national] Sure Start Unit did not commission one standardised data base. An awful lot of time and money has been wasted. We were keeping data on an excel spreadsheet. I was determined to do it.



We have measured the life out of programmes before they have been able to deliver. It's only really now that we have time for things to mean something. Year one - how many people came? But some people did not even have an office. It took 3 years before we had a building and a full complement of staff. Every programme was in a different stage, even those starting in the same year. Where's

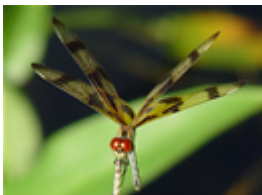
the consistency?

We have been just so well funded

'There will be drawing in horns on what we will be able to deliver. It will be a shock to some people. We have been just so well funded. People don't know what it was like before. Nice things like trips away, day trips to the seaside they did not have to pay for. We have a play group every day of the week that you don't have to pay for, you don't even have to pay 10p for a cup of tea. Parents who have older children say it is amazing what we have had. There is someone I can ring up and don't have to wait 3 months. It's an area of high need. You want people to be able to have what they need. But it's easy come easy go - a breakfast club that no one wants to take up because they might have to pay a little bit of money, they are so used to everything being free. £3 for an hour for breakfast club. Some can claim it back - not a flat rate. If it's free it tends to be taken for granted, which is a real shame.

The Children's Centre

'It's a mess at the moment. I don't think the local authority was ready to do it. There's been a fair bit of denial. They did not realise the extent and the complexity of what we do. Every single programme is different, responding to local need. There are people being employed to do the things we already do - re-invent the wheel: how we communicate to families that Children's Centres are coming. We've been doing this. Now they've got someone from Corporate Communications when we've already developed a strategy, produced literature and talked to parents about the changes. Now they are starting to say 'No, you're not to do that'. They are developing signage.



We're not totally clear. I am assuming they know they are reporting to the DFES. Education will eventually pick up the baton. We are never invited to any meetings. Data collection - we don't need to change it that much, but it would be good for all the programmes to do it in the same way. We are no longer operating as a local programme. At which point do I no longer manage this programme, when does it become someone else's responsibility? My post won't exist. It will metamorphose. I have a job till March 07, within that time, my job will change. I don't know what to. I feel that [education] is a better place, I'm not a health person. For the programme I don't think it will be any better or worse - a bigger body with an infrastructure to support it. Not a philosophic difference. Elements of education and health in the programme work alongside each other.

'When will commissioning be borough wide? [Projects funded by Sure Start] were told they will have 3 months' notice. We were told nothing else, it's all informal. We will start losing

really good people, they're not going to wait around. They could have started it a bit earlier. Until I know what is going to fall out of the sieve I really can't say.'

Mary's story

Mary is the Head of the Nursery School, run by the Education department of the local authority. Since the Children's Centre took over from Sure Start, she is also head of the Children's Centre. She has been in post 8 years. She talks about how the beginning of the Sure Start project affected her school:

'When Sure Start started, part of the bid was for an extra 20 places for 3 year olds. The head of Early Years in the borough did it without any consultation about what it means to the school to have 20 extra full time children, or where we would put them, or what would happen at lunchtimes. The bid was for two nursery nurses - one adult to 10 children. It caused us a grievous headache. Who's going to pay for the midday meals supervisors? Also she put in for the salaries of the nursery nurses, but forgot the on-costs. So we were suddenly responsible for that. We did not have any money to pay them. It was £11,000. We had a budget of £32,000 at that point for everything. There we were suddenly a partner in this project without it being discussed with us at all. We had to find that £11,000: we just had to pull in our belts. We knew these Sure Start things were going on but no-one knew what they were. [The borough department of] Education was not a good partner. I don't think they have been at all across this borough. Health seemed to know a lot more about what Sure Start was about than Education. No one seemed to pick it up in Education and run with it. We were told in March. In April we were told the bid had been successful and we were to start appointing people for the September. Suddenly I was running it. [the Early Years Co-ordinator] had taken her name off and put my name in. I was then a partner, without having any real idea what was going on.



'We lost all the money'

'This has been quite difficult... there's been this hideous block of flats - since I've been at this school they've been planning to demolish them. The council won't commit to a date. We hoped at the beginning of the Sure Start that we would have that land and that the Community Centre would be rebuilt opposite the school and would offer a lot of the services for Sure Start, including the Community Nursery. This would be a big Sure Start partnership area. Some money was put aside by Early Years and by Sure Start, but there was no agreement from the Council when the flats would be demolished and or when the plot would be available. We lost all the money from the local authority and from Sure Start. There was difficulty elsewhere with another

building that was being built - that used up money on litigation and re-building. It was dreadful.

It looked as if we wouldn't be able to be part of the first round the Children's centres, but if we didn't become a Children's Centre, we would lose all our Sure Start money, and we would lose all the services that parents had started to rely on in this area.



'We have a really good partnership in the Sure Start. We've been so lucky. The Programme Director made it so good. She was just a really good leader, very non-judgemental, very supportive but she was very strong. There was no way she was having any rubbish. She was just a really lovely person- everyone could relate to her. She knew the programme absolutely inside out, exactly what people were supposed to be offering, she monitored really carefully what was happening all the different parts.

'We became a Children's Centre'

'So the three of us sat down - the Sure Start Programme Director, the man doing Early Years from the Council - I never really knew what his job was - and myself. How could we become a Children's Centre? Who could we link with? There is the Community Nursery at the local Community Centre which offers all-day care from 8 to 6 for 50 weeks of the year. They take children from 6 months; that would meet the childcare part. We could offer the education side. In the Community Centre there was space for parents to use. We thought we would have time to work up to this. Actually a letter back came back - you are now a Children's Centre. We were told they would give £750,000 towards rebuilding from the National Children's Centre programme- it's devolved down to the borough. But you had to have a plot of land, and you had to have plans and planning permission within two months. You can't get planning permission in 2 months even if you had a plot of land. We were back to square one again, with no building and no land.

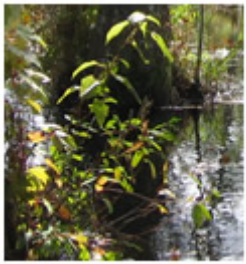
The Community Nursery

'We talked about what we could do in the short term. The Community Nursery is in the Community Centre - it's a very difficult building, on its last legs, but very well loved. It's been there for nearly 150 years. She's an old lady, that building, everyone knows it. The nursery is on the upper floors. There is no disability access, and babies are up on the top floor. They can't go out of doors. Whatever you do with it, it's so old. There is a piece of land at the end of this road where there could be a modular building, at least to get the nursery out of there. but their manager came back from maternity leave. She loves that

building. She said: 'I am determined we will stay in the building till we've got a permanent building'. I am not sure the building is going to stand that long. This is an issue between us. It is causing difficulty. In the meantime the rest of the staff have shut down. They were getting very excited about moving into a new building. Now they won't discuss it - very loyal to their manager, as they should be.

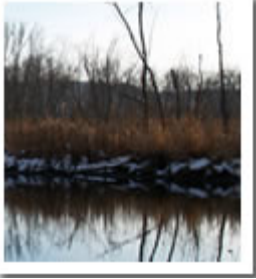
'The Community Centre Co-ordinator is finding the whole process very hard. He doesn't understand about the Children's Centre or where the money's coming from. The reason he's in it is that he would get some money towards the rebuilding of his centre, he's the business brain. He will do quite a lot of the fundraising. We also need to be pushing the local authority for money. We were hoping the Co-ordinator had a buyer for the Community Centre. They were prepared to pay him to re-build opposite on this plot of land. We don't know whether to give up on it or not. If the Council give us a plot of land, we could use the money from the sale of the Community Centre. Otherwise we're going to have to get a huge sum of money.

The co-ordinator doesn't really see how the Nursery and the Children's Centre would work together with the Community Centre. He still thinks that the Community Centre will be the Children's Centre, rather than the Children's Centre will incorporate the Community Centre Nursery. The whole thing about who is the head of the Children's Centre has caused him a great deal of grief, though he doesn't actually say it. I'm the head of the centre, simply because the money has to come through the school's governing body because that's the way it's been set up. I cannot do that job unless I have someone dealing with the community aspect of things. The new Co-ordinator does a very good job of that. I would really like to have her working with me in a shared leadership role, also the Community Nursery Manager - I can't run her nursery. She runs her nursery perfectly well.



On quality and the parents

'What we need to do is to make sure the quality is the same in all the settings, one manager who will give an overview. That would be my role. I'm having regular meetings with the Community Nursery manager and with the Sure Start Coordinator, she keeps me up to date on what's happening in the partnership. I go to Parents' Forum meetings so I know what's going on, what they are intending to do, they work really hard, the Parents' Forum, they have representatives from just about all the different groups.



'On quality - the ideas come from everybody. It's very difficult because we are in such early days, working together as a Children's Centre. A lot of things will come via Ofsted. We have an agreed vision for what we want, not only for the children, but for our whole community, because we have such a big involvement of parents.

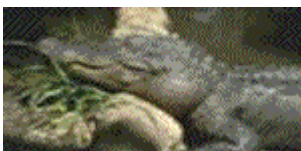
That's the important thing - there's no point me sitting in my ivory tower and saying: This is what we need. I don't live here. What right have we got to tell parents what they should have? We need to be listening to the parents and finding out what they feel they need, inputting also what we think is important from a professional view. Melding those ideas to make the Children's Centre. What we all want is for everybody to be the best they can be. There is a difficult area to bring up kids. We've got parents who are really looking forward. That's all come from Sure Start. We've worked with these parents since their children were babies. We have a community group of schools within this immediate locality. The Parents' Forum asked if they could come and meet the head teachers. Their children are now moving into primary school. And they are saying we want to move what we have been doing here in Sure Start into the schools. They feel enabled to do that, through Sure Start. They have the confidence to come here and sit with all these head teachers, and say: This is what we have done; this is what we can offer your school. This is how we can work with. The heads were sitting there...'

Issues in this story

Firstly we can see **three important questions** are raised about partnership working. Then **key themes visible** in the case are indicated along with links to the stories that raise them.

What kind of relationship is this partnership?

What are the expectations? For example do partners have shared goals? **What accountability do funded organisations have to Sure Start and Sure Start to them?** Are the funds a grant or payment for services or for management? [Rachel Chair: [Willow's] attitude was almost like - we've bought a building off you and now it's not here. As Sure Start you're not coming up with the goods.] See Tomlinson 2005 [References and overall themes.]



When do you withdraw from a partner or partnership? [chair and Willow project]

Who are the service users: parents or children or both? How does this affect the partnership?

Is the main focus of Sure Start about work, training and/or support for parents; or community development; or is it about childcare or children's development and empowerment? we put this as very either/or. I guess it's both and the problem is doing both well

The importance of territory is vivid. Buildings are symbolic spaces - people talk of 'strongholds' [Hope], 'boundaries', 'turf', being 'new kid on the block' [chair] hyperlink to 'She loves that community building Head page 3' - as opposed to a virtual organisation [Mary head]; issues of permanence and transience loom large - from the mud walls ruined in the rain to the resistance to a temporary 'modular' community nursery ['rammed earth' Rachel]

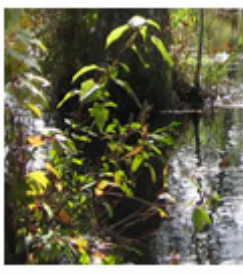
Face-to face - It was important for people to meet together physically 'key people getting together' [head], 'meeting up with others' [parent] - social process and immediacy when face to face - for parents and staff. 'doing a joint visit' [coordinator]; 'lots of agencies use this as a portal or meeting point'[Lydia coordinator].



Practitioners - working together was seen as 'virtual' [coordinator] though they met face to face. Flexible and responsive was a way of working - to 'keep to the essence' while keeping responsiveness [Lydia coordinator] They introduced mothers to other practitioners and practitioners' feedback was valued. This process by which 'two halves create a whole in a new virtual way' [coordinator] is the opposite of the kind of narrow 'professionalism' demonstrated by the traditional 'Officers-in-Charge' of social services day centres. It also raises the issue of professional jargon or body language, as experienced by Della, the mother in her comments on Mary, the Nursery School Head.

Power and control - The Head of the Community Association wants the Children's Centre to be his project and so does the head of the Willow project. Mary the Nursery School Head says it is automatic for her role to be the head of the Children's Centre. Linked to this are issues of conflict, and emotion: involving lawyers, with people 'being quite emotional' and 'getting more heated' chair p 3 a 'blame game' chair p 3, and issues of loyalty in this adversarial context. [Rachel chair].

There are also issues of trust: 'we believed the project manager' [Rachel chair]



Accountability links to power and control. The Nursery School Head sees herself as having professional accountability; ['you do need one manager who will give an overview' head]. Some national targets are seen as 'bonkers' : 'we have measured the life out of

programmes before they have been able to deliver' [Lydia coordinator]. Data is complex to collect: the aim is for consistency and comparison with different programmes but Rachel points out that projects are all at a different stage. She sums up her view of what is required as 'responsibility without authority' [Rachel chair].

Organisations were also 'to accountability. The PCT manages Hope & provides project management which is not accountable to Sure Start and can't be controlled by them. The absence of the borough's social services department is notable, probably a result of few resources for other than direct statutory duties. They did not take up preventative work possibilities. The Education department did not know anything about what was on ground and variations between Sure Start projects (there were 7 in this borough).

Leadership : Mary, the Nursery School Head ['very apparent that she is Head ...in meetings all the time; 'how does she find time for the in-between things?' [Della, the mother]; and Hope the Programme Director are seen in contrast: she 'gets down and dirty' is 'fun-loving' [Della parent]. Hope aims at a personal approach and modelling it; she 'blends in extremely well' [Della].



These stories show a range of parental involvement, from significant empowerment to marginalisation - for example through an absence of preventative work with families who have the most difficulties because of the lack of any Social Services involvement. There are different views on dependency vs support [hyperlink to texting](#) - [Rachel chair and Hope]. Unlike many projects, parents participate in financial decisions ('we say yea or nay' parent) . There is a 'good mix' of parents involved in decisions. Della's story shows how she got gradually and increasingly involved, building her own and others' confidence on the way. Issues of class [parent] and diversity [chair] are raised. There is a process of outreach to so-called hard to reach groups, both by professionals and parents: 'We stop people on the bus' [parent] .

Gender issues lurk within the stories: Sure Start is thought to be about children so it's seen as 'a bunch of women' [Della the mother] with an absence of dads. Few men are mentioned, and these are all in unclear, disembodied, absent roles: the Director of the Community Association is the 'business brain'; the local authority Early Years person - 'not sure what he did' One dad was employed in the project; the PCT project manager was seen as ineffective. Two dads were said to be involved, but one had disappeared.

There was silence about a philosophy of childcare - what assumptions were made about child development or empowerment; about lesbians and gay men as staff or parents. There was an explicit mention of a Thai mother, a Black British mother and an Egyptian mother attending a meeting with Rachel; together with a mention of 'any colour person' [Della parent].



Policy and implementation - see the diagram which draws on 3 levels of change (Moss Kanter 1992). Moss Kanter's concept of change sums up the multiple levels of change that people in this case are dealing with. It also helps highlight the difficulties of translating policy into

practice on the ground

- everything happened too fast
- 20 extra children - Mary head of the Nursery School
- 'Suddenly you're a partner, 'it takes time to involve everybody' Hope
- 'I swooped in' - Rachel, chair.
- no one knew anything - uncertainty for all, both at the beginning of Surestart and in the shift to the Children's centre - everyone comments on the latter.
- contradictory directions of the change - more involvement and empowerment but strong quantitative measures and move to more centralised decisions on commissioning
- statutory sector was restructuring so couldn't respond at the time and in the way the changes needed
- dislocation between levels - borough and government do not know what is happening on the ground
- need for a centrally produced database for Sure Start to support local work

Moss Kanter's 3 dynamic levels demonstrate the movement at national level, between parts of the local system and between individuals - see powerpoint

The mapping of the case study and its component organisations also shows the complexities of implementing locally a national policy and how links over time changed here. [PDF version](#)

[PPT version](#)