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Understanding the Contribution of Sure Start Local Progammes to the Task of Safeguarding Children's Welfare

By Professor Jane Tunstill and Debra Allnock[1]

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) supported children under 4 and their families by integrating early education, childcare, health care and family support services in disadvantaged areas.

This study explores the existing and planned contribution of SSLPs (now Sure Start Children's Centres) to the objective of staying safe, and examines their strategic and operational inter-relationships with social services departments, in order to identify existing good practice.

Key findings

▶ Collaboration between SSLPs and social services departments around safeguarding poses challenges for many local authorities - these reflect longstanding tensions between services designed to support families and those designed to protect children.

▶ Staff see the concept of 'safeguarding as everyone's business' as a helpful one which provides a new framework within which their agencies can develop collaborations and overcome old barriers.

▶ The four study authorities have adopted three main styles in their collaborative relationships between children's services (social care) and SSLPs, reflecting local characteristics and existing relationships, these are: parallel development; aspirational engagement-development; and maximum collaboration.

▶ Forging inter-agency links is a lengthy, complex and on-going process requiring efficient complementary mechanisms around assessment and recording. The role of managers is crucial - they can prioritise multi-agency working and establish trust between staff across different agencies.

▶ Inter-professional and inter-agency collaboration requires: a shared understanding/acceptance of thresholds; confidence in information sharing with parents and other professionals; and systematic recording systems.

▶ Joint working around child protection must be based on clear aims and objectives that are understood by all the agencies and staff involved, and pro –actively, regularly disseminated.

▶ Strategies which help overcome staff resistance to collaborating in safeguarding activity include: operational linkages between child protection and family support; and managers helping staff see safeguarding services in terms of packages rather than isolated services.

▶ Regular contact and access to informal advice from other professionals can improve service provision and lead to more appropriate referrals between organisations.

▶ The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) can provide a bridge for communication between members of the children's workforce in respect of individual children and underpin the provision of a seamless service at Tiers 2 & 3.

▶ Co-location of multi-disciplinary teams has both strengths and limitations - the consequences for different groups of families should be carefully thought through, so practitioners can offer a choice of routes to services for parents in different circumstances..

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SureStart

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Evidence & research

Aims of the Study

The study aims:

- To explore ways, such as establishing mutual direct referral routes, in which SSLPs and social service departments can work in collaboration;
- To ascertain if, and how, SSLPs are represented in local structures such as Area Child Protection Committees/Safeguarding Boards;
- To explore the nature of concerns about individual children, likely to trigger referrals between social services departments and SSLPs and vice versa;
- To identify the range of supports requested and provided;
- To explore the SSLP contribution to positive outcomes for children, before and after referral to/assessment by children's services;
- To identify and describe examples of good practice in this area of collaboration.

Background

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) – now Sure Start Children's Centres- were community-based and supported an average of between 400 and 800 children under four years old. There were 524 programmes which were rolled out in six stages or 'rounds'. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) has been assessing the impact, implementation, community characteristics and cost effectiveness of SSLPs by examining the first 260 programmes, the first four rounds.

This study forms part of the Implementation Module of the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS). One key theme to emerge from the Implementation Module was the attitudinal and operational challenges faced by SSLPs in establishing a working relationship between their own family support activity and the work of the social services departments in their local authorities. The roll out of 3,500 Children's Centres, underlined the importance of responding

to these challenges as did the requirements of the Every Child Matters agenda[2], with it's specific emphasis on issues such as :

- More specialised help to promote opportunity, prevent problems and act early, and effectively, if and when, problems arise;
- The development of a shared sense of responsibility across agencies for safeguarding children and protecting them from harm;
- Listening to children, young people and their families when assessing and planning service provision, as well as in face-to-face delivery.

In the 20 Implementation Module case studies[3], issues identified by SSLP staff included:

- Tensions between preventive and protective roles - programmes were anxious to maintain their current capacity for preventive work and almost all programmes took steps to actively distance themselves from perceived pressure from social services to take on aspects of the latter's work;
- Workforce shortages-respondents stressed the need to solve social work staff shortages if the Every Child Matters agenda was to have a real chance of being implemented;
- The need for training and support of staff - all Programme Managers highlighted the importance of supervision and support for their outreach and family workers around domestic violence, child neglect, and child protection work.

[2]Every Child Matters: Change for Children: DfES, 2004; p4

[3]Tunstill, J et al (2005). Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An in-depth study. DfES: London

Methodology

The study, undertaken between autumn 2004 and March 2007, comprised:

(a) an exploration of the safeguarding policy and practice of 8 local programmes, already identified by the Sure Start Unit of DfES, as exemplifying 'relatively good practice', and (b) a study of four local authorities, to enable the fuller exploration of wider partnerships and networking activity across a whole local authority.

A conceptual framework was derived by the research team, from existing literature on cross agency and cross professional partnership working[4], and from data collected in their earlier NESS work, in order to study arrangements currently in place; and to identify key challenges for future attention.

Data was collected through: an analysis of documentation; from interviews with key stakeholders; and from a study of referrals from SSLPs to social services departments.

Findings

Understanding Safeguarding Policy and Practice at the Local Programme Level: Indicators of Good Collaborative Working

Clear Aims and Objectives

Joint working around child protection should be based on clear aims and objectives, which are understood and accepted by all the agencies and individual professionals involved. Clear aims and objectives can manifest themselves in the following ways: a) having a widely shared and articulated understanding around the concept of safeguarding and child protection; b) the existence of easily accessible policy statements about child protection in the area; and c) evidence of a robust dissemination strategy for policy statements around safeguarding.

Information Sharing

"We have a common view with all our partners down the road about what we are striving to achieve around safeguarding - it really helps…one of the good things about the Sure Start programmes is it has made us all reflect on what we are doing and reflect on common terms" (social services manager).

"We have an induction pack for all members of staff which has the child protection policy in it - if there is new information we have circulation systems by memo-or e:mail" (programme manager).

Interagency Working

A significant **barrier** to interagency working in the context of safeguarding is resistance to organisational change on the part of some staff. Successful approaches to transcending barriers generated by traditional ways of working might include: 1) operational linkages between child protection and family support; 2) the frequency with which staff talk about 'family support' rather than child protection; 3) managing staff with a view to developing flexible forward thinking about the task of safeguarding children; and 4) seeing safeguarding services in terms of 'packages' rather than as isolated services.

All Encompassing

"Safeguarding to me is about encompassing the preventative work. The children in need stuff has always been the poor relation - but now safeguarding has come in, I think it will take that work into account…."(programme manager)

"In all honesty we didn't actually set out to provide packages of support-that developed, because we were keen to tailor services to individual needs - and now we are able to offer amazing support to families…"(deputy programme manager).

[4]Cameron, A., and Lart, R. (2003). Factors Promoting and Obstacles Hindering Joint Working: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence," Journal of Integrated Care, 11 (2) 9-17) .

Given the multi-agency brief of safeguarding, the degree of support emanating from the highest levels of the management system was crucial. *"We've got the Director of Children's Services on our Board and it makes a huge difference…"* (programme manager).

Two key tasks associated with developing positive multi-agency working in safeguarding are: a) joined up working as a priority for mainstream managers; b) establishing trust between managers from SSLPs and social services.

Roles and Responsibillities

Clearly identified roles and responsibilities are important for good collaborative working. Clarity can help ensure that all parties know what is expected of them and what they can expect from their counterparts. This is particularly true in multi-agency projects where individual professions or teams are developing innovative ways of working. Three key tasks were identified in ensuring clarity of roles: a) designating a central point of contact; b) sharing information about roles and responsibilities; c) having co-working arrangements.

"The close contact means you can have all sorts of conversations and they actually begin to understand our social work responsibilities and the safeguarding role they have-so all these people come to me to talk about what has happened, to check out safeguarding - it's really interesting" (out-posted social worker).

Information Sharing

Protocols/procedures for information sharing are important in enhancing dialogue between professionals from different backgrounds. Opportunities must be made available for professionals to talk to each other, and lines of communication kept open. *"With the Child Health Information System, you've got midwifery, health information - different bits where we pour different*

bits of information - it's about practitioners being aware of those systems and getting the information that's needed around a particular child" (Programme manager).

Staff and managers in the 8 SSLPs acknowledged the importance of information sharing for integrated and joint working. They were particularly aware of its significance in the context of safeguarding children and two important developments were identified, which were positively impacting on communication in collaborative working: a) information sharing with Social Services Departments; b) the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) as a response to the need for improvements in information sharing.

"The CAF provides an action plan and from that a lead professional is nominated. It's backed up by an evidence trail and not only by practitioners talking to one another…" (Health Visitor).

Good practice: using forms

8 SSLP in one authority developed a standardised referral form for use by all the local agencies, including social workers, to speed up access to services for families across the area. These forms were very tangible examples of the 'fit' between *record keeping* and *access to services*. In these 8 programmes, such referrals potentially increased the 'reach' of the programme and in particular, would enable SSLPs to make contact with families who had been more challenging to engage.

Links with Other Professionals

In the context of safeguarding, regular contact and access to informal advice from other professionals can improve service provision and lead to more appropriate referrals between organisations. Sharing offices or being based in the same building could increase the opportunity for communication between employees from different agencies, as long as staff are supported

and encouraged to work proactively in this way. However both multi-disciplinary team work and co-location arrangements could be useful in facilitating informal links between professionals. *"Multi-disciplinary working really helps-day to day, face to face contact with our social work colleague from social services is crucial-partly for understanding her perspective and partly for sharing her knowledge.." (programme manager).*

Putting Family Support At The Centre

Family support panels are multi-agency panels established to work within the same boundaries covered by each of the three children's centre clusters with an emphasis on early intervention. Different providers in the area meet and share information about the families /children they are working with in their own organisations. The panels will allocate preventive Tier 2 services to vulnerable children-any professional in the area can refer a child or family to the panel.

Inter-Agency/Joint Training

SSLP staff and managers in each of the programmes we studied reported the potential benefits of inter-agency/joint training. It was seen as promoting understanding between professionals; as 'breaking down professional barriers' and 'promoting communication and network building'. It helped professionals to understand their role in the safeguarding task. Strands in a robust training strategy included : a) programme-wide encouragement and enthusing of staff to access opportunities for training; b) having a strategic plan to make good any gaps in capacity through training; c) harnessing the potential of induction training; d) having a comprehensive and integrated training scheme in place.

Maximising Collaboration

By 2005 it was clear that a consensus was beginning to emerge across SSLPs and social services/children's services departments as to how best to meet the most complex needs of children, including their need for safeguarding. Inter-professional and interagency collaboration, in the context of referrals for child protection concerns, was most likely to be maximised where the following characteristics were discernable: a) shared understanding and acceptance of thresholds; b) confidence in information sharing both with parents and other professionals; c) systematic recording systems.

Understanding Safeguarding Policy and The Practice across the Local Authority

Collaborative Links

The four authorities studied approach the task of designing collaborative relationships between children's services (social care) and SSLPs/children's centres in three different ways, reflecting local characteristics and existing relationships.

These can be understood along the following continuum:

Continuum of Engagement

Parallel development	Aspirational engagement-development		Maximum collaboration
Southshire	East Borough	Midtown	City Borough

Within these approaches, three 'organisational styles ' can be identified as being adopted by the four authorities to facilitate collaboration between different parts of their children's services provision, these include a) local area emphasis b) a single point of access model c) single cross authority service design.

Good Practice: Links between area child and family social work teams and SSLPs/children's centres works

Since the early days of Sure Start a social worker has been out-posted on a half-time basis to each SSLP and this arrangement continues with the Children's Centres in each of the cluster areas. The other half of their time is as a Family Support Team member. She occupies a crucial liaison and expert advisory role on child protection and family support issues to her colleagues. This model has provided a clear mechanism for facilitating collaborative working and has increased the confidence of SSLPs/children's centres staff in respect of child protection issues.

Forging inter-agency links is a lengthy, complex, multi-faceted and on-going process, requiring the existence of efficient, complementary mechanisms around assessment and recording, eg the Common Assessment Framework, and appropriate, reliable and sensitively designed systems. Neither social work services nor SSLPs had kept a record of referrals from/to each other, which complicated the study data collection task, and in the authorities, potentially undermined the task of strategic planning. Record keeping, while regarded by many practitioners as time-consuming offers a pathway in to the 'right service packages' and should be seen as proactive and capable of providing a helpful response to emerging family problems in the community, and of describing positive policy and practice.

The specific policy era within which the study was undertaken has been very costly in terms of the change management systems involved, which have for example, required experienced staff to join a number of committees at the local level and/or to undertake a range of training courses. Inevitably there have been some steps back in the process of introducing these new systems, particularly so in the case of large non-unitary authorities with more complex partnership arrangements.

Workforce Issues

All four authorities are aware of the need to keep the staff they already have and to remain competitive as recruiters of new staff. Regardless of turnover rates, where there are diverse populations, authorities acknowledge the need to recruit a workforce whose ethnicity and/or other characteristics is helpful. There is universal acknowledgement of the strengths which having a stable and well-established workforce brings to the development of inter-agency collaborations. 'Ancestral memories' are very useful in setting in context the nature of current anxieties and help staff keep in perspective the demands generated by new ways of working.

Defining Terms

Clarity of terminology is important. Many responses underline the lack of precision with which a number of important terms are currently being used. Although such ambiguity will have an obvious impact on the collection of data such as that presented in our study, confusion on the part of workforce stakeholders can also have an impact on day- to- day collaboration. In particular a blurring of the terms, co-location; attachments; multi-disciplinary teams; and out-posting can influence workers' expectations of each other, and make it difficult to be clear about the lines of accountability. The task of clarifying such issues might well be addressed in induction training, and revisited in the course of supervision sessions and appraisals.

Particular importance is attached to the use of the word 'family support worker'. This area of work is assuming a central role in the context of current policy developments, including around both children's centres; and extended schools. The term can be applied to both individuals and teams, and as we found tends to be currently deployed differently in different authorities. A family support worker may mean a social care worker who

works under the supervision of a qualified social worker, while a family support team may comprise a combination of social workers and family support workers.

The Common Assessments Framework

The CAF, properly implemented, can provide a bridge for communication between members of the children's workforce in respect of individual children. At the same time it can help underpin, to the benefit of children and their parents, the provision of a "seamless service" across service activity at Tiers 2 and 3. For this to work to the benefit of families and to facilitate the cost effective use of staff time, further work is needed to explore how the CAF approach and referral systems fit with the Integrated Children's System (ICS). The ICS is now being introduced as the assessment and recording system which underpins children and family services, in respect of work at Tiers 3 & 4.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Co-Location and Multi- Disciplinary Teams

Current policy stresses the potential advantages of multi-disciplinary teams and of co-locating teams from different parts of the children's workforce in one building. It can bring benefits for staff, especially for social work services to be capable of 'easy access' in and by the community. However co-location is not without its problems as there are negative consequences for different groups of families. Some families may be going through especially stressful and difficult periods, including being the subject of formal child protection inquiries. In these circumstances their level of distress, and in some cases of aggression, may mean they require a more discrete and/or confidential entry point to services than through the front door of a children's centre. Conversely parents using a children's centre to access (only) day care provision may be deterred if they encounter angry parents whose circumstances they do not understand.

It is therefore crucial for service planning to acknowledge the diverse nature of parental/family needs at different points. Service planning needs to ensure there is an adequate degree of choice for parents. One option may be to ensure that local provision includes, alongside children's centres, a continued mix of family centres, i.e. drop in and referral; as well as referral only.

Boundaries

A related point in respect of co-location and of multi-disciplinary teams, attachments of social workers and/or out posting of staff, is the set of challenges posed by the nature of area team boundaries. Where area team boundaries are drawn in such a way that more than one team covers the area of a children's centre, this may make some or all of these organisational arrangements more complex than they at first seem. Careful thought needs to be given to building on existing linkages as well as to forging new relationships, if some families are not to receive a less high quality safeguarding service than would have been the case under existing arrangements.

Reducing Stigma

One important potential barrier in maximising access to services is the issue of stigma. Some SSLP staff are reluctant to 'encourage' people who use their services to go to Children's Services (social work services). All too often, social work input is equated unhelpfully with issues around inadequate parenting and/or child protection in the minds of both community members as well as members of the workforce. It is important to support the construction of 'bridges' to services and minimise such possible real or imagined barriers.

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Conclusion

The study findings underline the fact that staff across the four authorities share the belief that "safeguarding is everyone's business" and staff in different parts of the children's workforce acknowledge their potential respective contribution to this task. At the same time, while broadly sharing this common philosophy, the organisational means to the desired end vary: different authorities have developed different approaches. What is clear is that each of these strategic styles have much to offer other authorities in terms of lessons learned and approaches tested out. It is hoped the study data can help inform the implementation by other agencies, of flexible policies to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children - those whose development is likely to be impaired without the provision of co-ordinated safeguarding services.

Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

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