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# Improving the employability of parents in Sure Start local programmes

By Pamela Meadows<sup>1</sup> and Claudia Garbers<sup>2</sup>

Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) support children under 4 and their families by integrating services like early education, childcare, health and family support in specified geographic areas.

This study looked at what was happening to improve the employability of parents in twenty-five Sure Start local programmes, covering a wide range of activities and experience.

## Key findings

- ▶ Some parents in Sure Start areas face a range of complicated barriers to work, and require intense and sustained support to deal with them.
- ▶ Sure Start local programmes act mainly as a bridge for parents into the education, training and employment services of other organisations which specialise in providing these services.
- ▶ It is the quality of the collaboration with the other agencies which determines the success of Sure Start local programmes in tackling the issue of employability, and especially the links and networks that programme managers and staff bring with them to the programme. Collaboration between operational staff is often effective even where links are poor at a strategic level.
- ▶ Collaborations are more successful where they can help all the organisations involved to achieve their own objectives.
- ▶ The emphasis given to support for employability by programmes reflects different local perceptions about the appropriate role for mothers in the early years. In many Sure Start areas there is a strong community emphasis on the importance of mothers being at home in their children's early years.
- ▶ By emphasising confidence building and raising aspirations, Sure Start local programmes can reconcile what is sometimes perceived to be a conflict between promoting good parenting and promoting employability.
- ▶ The proportion of parents taking part in employment and training activities, even in the most active and encouraging programmes, is low. Those who do take part are almost all mothers.
- ▶ Although it may be difficult to engage parents in employment and training opportunities, all local programmes see improved confidence as an important early step towards employability, and all offer a range of approaches to building confidence in parents.
- ▶ The availability and affordability of childcare to enable parents to take up employment remains problematic in Sure Start areas, since the costs of daycare continue to be high.
- ▶ Providing childcare for parents attending education and training is an important contribution by local programmes towards improving employability.
- ▶ Where local programmes have an 'employment coordinator', relationships with specialist employment organisations have been developed and sustained, and individual parents have received enhanced individual support.
- ▶ This study identified five distinct approaches among Sure Start local programmes to the improvement of employability. These are described on the following pages.

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## Background

Sure Start services are delivered through community-based local programmes and support on average between 400 and 800 children under 4. There are 524 programmes, which have been rolled out in six stages or 'rounds'.

A comprehensive national evaluation is assessing the impact, implementation, community characteristics and cost effectiveness of Sure Start local programmes by examining the first 260 programmes – the first four rounds. The earliest of these programmes were approved in late 1999, the later rounds by early 2002.

## Aims of the study

Promoting the employability of parents is an important feature of Sure Start local programmes. 'Employability' is the capacity to gain and keep a job, to cope with changes at work and in the wider economy, and the ability to get a new job if necessary. Employment has a direct impact on incomes, helping to lift families from poverty, and recent research suggests that this can have significant effects on children's mental health, behaviour and social integration. There is also evidence to show that children with employed parents do better at school and therefore improve their own earning potential.

On average nearly half the children aged 0-3 in Sure Start local programme areas live in households where no adult has a job. The programmes have a specific target: "to reduce by 12% the number of 0-3 year old children in Sure Start areas living in households where no one is working."

This study investigated:

- ▶ what measures Sure Start local programmes were adopting to improve the employability of parents;
- ▶ what other opportunities to improve employability were available in Sure Start communities (like New Deal for Communities or the European Social Fund);
- ▶ how these measures related to local labour market circumstances and the labour market needs of parents;
- ▶ what sort of results were being achieved.

The study is a short, qualitative review, drawing mainly on in-depth interviews with local programme staff, parents using services and staff in related local agencies. It also draws on data produced by other parts of the National Evaluation of Sure Start, the 2001 Census and by local programmes themselves. Visits to local programmes provided opportunities for the observation of practice.

## Characteristics of the study areas

The twenty-five programmes studied either had at least half the children living there in a household where no adult had a job<sup>3</sup>, or were spending significant sums to tackle parental employability. Fourteen of the programmes included in the study met both these criteria. In fact, it became clear as the research progressed that programme expenditure was not a useful indicator of employability activity. Some of the programmes which had recorded zero expenditure in their accounts under the heading of improving parents' employability were nevertheless active on this front.

<sup>3</sup> Children aged 0-3 years in households where adults are receiving Job Seeker's Allowance, Income Support, Incapacity benefit or Severe Disability Allowance.

Since SSLPSs operate in areas of deprivation, the numbers of households with nobody working is generally significantly higher than the national average. The average proportion of children under four in workless households in the first four rounds of local programmes is 44.6%. However, in some areas eight out of ten children live in such households, in others eight out of ten families have one or both parents in work. There are wide variations in circumstances between areas.

## Approaches to employability

While some Sure Start local programmes see encouraging parents to find paid work as a central part of their objective of improving the well-being of children and families, others perceive a tension between encouraging parents to go out to work and supporting the belief of many parents that part of being a good parent is to be at home with children when they are young. Some staff and some parents themselves expressed this tension:

*'Why do parents have to go to work? It's against what the evidence suggests, that up to three years children need to bond with one person. But yet we put our children in day nurseries at six months old, it's a contradiction'*

### Worker in a Sure Start programme

To some extent these differences are reflected in the spectrum of approaches to improving employability found in the programmes included in the study. They can be grouped into five types:

- **active approaches**, involving collaboration with a range of agencies and positive encouragement for parents to take advantage of opportunities offered; identifying obstacles and helping parents overcome them; links with both employment and training agencies are strong.
- **lifelong learning approaches**, where programmes respond to parents' expressed wish for education and training, encourage a return to learning and support an easy progression from basic to advanced training provided by other agencies. This approach emphasises skill development rather than immediate employment and the programme's links with agencies delivering employment support may be less well developed than the links with education and training agencies – which are usually strong.
- **'intermediate labour market'** approaches, in which the Sure Start programme structures its own job opportunities, recruitment and training procedures so that it can employ local people in the programme as widely as possible. In these examples the programme is contributing to the employability of parents and others in the community by providing work experience and job-related training, and this increases both the level of income and the working role models for those living in the area.
- **passive approaches**, where programmes offer access to mainstream employment and training provision but no extra encouragement, special support or help with obstacles.
- **disengaged approach**, where programmes have limited links with other agencies, offer no active encouragement to parents and have little or no provision of services relevant to employability.

## Collaborating with other organisations

The main way in which local programmes improve parents' employability is through their collaboration with other organisations whose main purpose is to help people improve their skills and find jobs. They can act as a bridge to help parent's find suitable training courses and secure a place on the course for example. Thus, Sure Start local programmes' success in this field depends on the quality of those collaborative relationships.

This in turn is influenced by the personal relationships between the Sure Start local programme staff and those working in the other organisations, and also by the extent to which both the SSLP and the other organisation can each help the other to meet their own objectives. Collaborations are also more likely to be successful if Sure Start staff are committed to the programmes' wider objectives and recognise that parents and children gain from improving parents' work-related skills and job prospects.

All the local programmes in the study had some links with agencies specialising in employability, especially with Jobcentre Plus, New Deal for Communities projects, other area-based job generation initiatives, local colleges, the Learning and Skills Council and the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) for child care training. In some areas the SSLPs are working with agencies like Jobcentre Plus Employment Action Teams and again this has proved mutually beneficial in helping parents find work. But this type of collaboration is not always pursued, and links often depend on the ethos and experience of staff from both the SSLP and other organisations. However, there were many examples of complex multi-agency co-operations, sometimes initiated by Sure Start, sometimes by others.

The nature of these links and collaboration varies and also includes:

**Signposting:** leaflets and information on services and support available both within the Sure Start local programme and in partner agencies; job-boards advertising local vacancies.

**Drop-ins and One-stop shops:** where parents can find out about local training and employment opportunities. These usually include information from a number of providers, like Jobcentre Plus benefits advisors and lone parent advisors, and regeneration initiatives like New Deal for Communities.

**Open days:** Often advice from outside agencies is offered alongside entertainment and family fundays. The key purpose is to make contact with parents not known to Sure Start, but these events promote collaborative working between agencies.

All the programmes also had links with local training providers, such as further education and community colleges. At an active level the SSLP might commission colleges to provide training for Sure Start parents at times and locations suitable for them; or a college might change the nature, timing and location of its own mainstream courses in response to suggestions from the Sure Start local programme. Colleges which are actively collaborating with local programmes in engaging parents have benefited from a new client group, new areas of learning are being opened up and community capacity is being developed. However, there is evidence from some areas of less satisfactory collaborations with colleges, which are not always sufficiently flexible or imaginative to develop the provision that will meet parents' needs.

### Good practice

The Local Education Authority's adult and community learning service employs a partnership worker who works with people in areas of high deprivation. She sets up free courses for her target groups – people with disabilities, people with caring responsibilities, ex-offenders and so on – at venues that are comfortable and easy-to-reach. For the local Sure Start programme she has arranged various courses, like keep fit and dancing, first aid and basic food hygiene, as well as raising self-esteem and confidence.

## Employability services delivered by Sure Start local programmes

In addition to working with other organisations, Sure Start local programmes offer a range of activities themselves which contribute directly or indirectly to improving the employability of parents.

### General support

All Sure Start local programmes offer support to parents to get out of the home, overcome anxieties about using services and participate in communal activities. There is practical help for people to do this, including one-to-one support, transport to venues and child care. All programmes offer information to parents about the services they can access and the types of support on offer; most arrange for sessions with benefits advisors, or employ their own, to help parents understand and explore their financial choices.

### Challenge and encouragement

In the 'active', 'lifelong learning' and 'intermediate labour market' programmes, Sure Start staff feel that parents have unrealised potential and that helping them to find paid work will develop their confidence and skills, which will be reflected in their relationships with their children.

'I think a lot of people in the area are happy to go on with the benefit system. It's about talking to them and we say, 'When the kids are older the benefit money is reduced right down. Like when the kids leave school it will be enough money for you only. Why don't you look into getting into training, skills, qualifications and what not to carry you forward?' So that's the sort of thing.'

### Sure Start Programme Manager

The 'active', and 'intermediate labour market' programmes recognise that Sure Start parents may face complex barriers to work such as no qualifications, no work experience, fears about managing money (which has been taken care of while they are on benefit), transport and childcare problems for children under 4 and older children too. These programmes do not tackle the difficulties in isolation, since any one of these issues may be enough to prevent a parent from finding and keeping work, but they put services in place to help parents face and sort out each issue in turn.

Specialist staff in the more active programmes act as 'fixers' to help parents access training and job opportunities and to get education and training providers to meet the needs of Sure Start parents. These staff are often known as 'employment coordinators', or, in 'lifelong learning' programmes, 'training coordinators'. They develop a menu of education and training in response to what they hear from parents. They often organise the courses offered within the local programme and negotiate with external providers, like colleges, to run them. They will also help Sure Start parents to use mainstream provision, including helping them with childcare.

The illustration, below, shows the way support from an Employment Coordinator is tailored to each individual.

### An employment coordinator supports a parent

A parent had visited an agency to express an interest in work. The agency put her in touch with the local Sure Start programme and the Employment Coordinator visited her at her home. The parent wanted part-time work and had obtained an application form from a nearby supermarket. She had a history of keeping her older children off school to help with her youngest child who was very active. She had previously experienced domestic violence.

The Sure Start Employment Coordinator suggested the parent apply for a special needs place for her son, which would help him and also provide her with greater support in learning to manage him. Together they filled in the form for this.

She encouraged the parent to fill in the application form for the supermarket, but recommended that they go first to the Jobcentre to find out how much better off the parent would be if she worked for 16 hours per week. They arranged an appointment to do this together.

She reminded the parent that she might have to pay for some things, like school dinners that she was currently getting free, and that this needed to be taken into account when assessing if she would be better off in work. If the parent decided not to go to work immediately, the coordinator suggested she consider a training course to improve basic skills, or another subject.

In lifelong learning programmes, parents are encouraged to spend the time before their children start school in improving skills. The skills required may be basic. As one member of local programme staff explained:

‘There are two groups of people. First there are the ones who are ready and confident, and second the ones who lack self-esteem and confidence... Sometimes it has taken three years just to get people to come out of the house to join in some activities with their child... This is also an issue for employment, as there is no way that these people can hold a job. Confidence, self-esteem and aspirations all need to be raised first.’

But encouragement may be tempered by concern in SSLPs that the kinds of jobs locally available to parents are low paid and with little opportunity for advancement. Programme staff give examples of individuals who have extricated themselves from this cycle of ‘dead end’ jobs through taking up training opportunities. They use these accounts to stimulate other parents.

### Promotion of employability activities

Local programmes publicise opportunities for employment and training in various ways. Among the methods used by the more **active** programmes are:

- specific **employability days** where partner organisations which operate employment and training projects come to the Sure Start programme to tell parents about them;
- **outreach** through the local programme workers visiting parents at home and telling them about employment and training opportunities;
- **leafleting and newsletters** and other written materials, regularly delivered to Sure Start households, detailing opportunities;
- general **open days** and **drop-ins** where employment activities and training opportunities are promoted alongside other Sure Start services.



Once parents are engaged in training courses or employment activities, mentors or course tutors play an important role in keeping them interested and encouraging them to progress. But it is not easy, either to engage parents or to prevent drop-out. Examples of creative thinking were evident, like this one, described by a community education adviser:

'We had been finding it really difficult to get parents to do any courses at all. I finally came up with the idea of calling it 'Take a Better Photo' to attract parents in the first instance. This 'course' was designed to encourage parents to take better photos while at the same time promoting the improvement of writing skills by encouraging the labelling of photos and comments on them.'

The number of parents participating in training courses remains small, and the more closely related to paid employment and higher the level of course, the fewer the parents involved. Because Sure Start parents may be facing a complex set of difficulties beyond the fact that they are without employment, they often need intensive individual support to complete courses.

## Confidence building

All SSLPs see building parent's confidence as a crucial first step in promoting employability and there are various approaches to doing this.

Sure Start local programmes improve the confidence of parents by:

- Taking a step-by-step approach and moving parents forward gradually: getting parents to learn something new, like nail-painting or baby massage, and then moving them to activities more closely related to work.
- Throwing them in the deep end: getting them to give work a try, but supporting them while they do, on the principle that doing something real would provide the biggest boost to parents.
- Offering opportunities for volunteer experience within the programme.
- Arranging opportunities for volunteer experience outside the programme (which sometime lead to employment for the parents concerned).
- Supporting them to participate in the management of programme via the Partnership Board.

All Sure Start programmes are required to have parents on the Management Board and most offer training to parents to help them participate in meetings, appoint staff and introduce general management tasks.

### Good practice

The local programme has an induction for Board volunteers which includes development days covering issues like breaking barriers, getting rid of jargon, minutes and the format of meetings. It holds pre-Board meetings for parents only, to look at the agenda and minutes and talk about them. The Chair of the Board is a local parent who has now trained as a childminder, having gained confidence from the experience.



Programmes using parent volunteers for other aspects of the programme offer them training in the activities they will undertake, and also in child protection and first aid. Where Home-Start delivers home-visiting services in a Sure Start area, for example, it trains the volunteers very thoroughly:

'We try to keep it really varied because you don't know what your volunteer is going to experience when they go out to a family and we also give them an overview of domestic violence, and what may be going on and what to expect and how to handle themselves.'

### Home-Start Organiser

It is common for parents who start as volunteers to seek paid work in the local programme, in administration or childcare roles.

### Good practice

One Sure Start local programme runs a 'Community Volunteer' course on which parents shadow any employee in the programme – this includes any parents who are considering a training course but would like to know if they would enjoy the work. Parents have shadowed a range of staff, including midwives. (Several programmes report that parents have become interested in midwifery as a career.)

### Training

Sure Start local programmes with 'lifelong learning' or 'intermediate labour market' approaches, emphasise the importance of giving parents opportunities to develop skills in a wide range of areas. Programmes can run courses for smaller numbers of people than those offered by colleges or Learning and Skills Councils, and programmes have found it is best to provide learning opportunities in small doses. They offer taster sessions, moving to introductory sessions and courses lasting usually about six weeks. Parents can then move on to a second short course when they are ready. The gradualist approach is considered essential, as parents become accustomed to undertaking training. Long courses may be too daunting for some. Support from course tutors and friends on courses, and the camaraderie that develops in learning groups are mentioned as reasons why parents complete courses.

Commonly, training in basic skills and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is offered, with support from Learning and Skills Councils. Also common are courses introducing IT, writing a CV and preparing for job interviews, and most local programmes had a range of 'leisure' courses, popular with parents and seen as a way of attracting them to Sure Start and as a stepping stone to other courses.

Childcare work is one of the options available to parents who are looking to move into paid employment, and sixteen of the twenty five programmes in this study were supporting parents training for childcare. Parents who have trained under the Sure Start auspices may be working in childcare settings in the Sure Start area or beyond. Some Sure Start local programmes have collaborated in offering childcare training, thus providing a wider range of work experience opportunities for parents. Several programmes reported that childcare training courses were popular and had waiting lists. Parents are achieving NVQs at levels II and III and some are progressing further.

## Employing local people

A smaller number of Sure Start programmes, most importantly the 'intermediate labour market' programmes, but also other programmes to a lesser extent, place an emphasis on employing local people, designing jobs, pay scales and training packages to fit with what local people can offer. Working in this way makes many demands on the programme, and flexibility is necessary. Breaking down work roles so that parts can be done by people with limited or no formal qualifications can be challenging for qualified staff. Having procedures for maintaining confidentiality is an important part of retaining the confidence of other parents when members of the community are employed in the programme. In addition, parents with limited work experience can find day-to-day work disciplines challenging at first.

In one programme with this approach the employment coordinator commented,

*"It was difficult for all of us and it was challenging for some (parents) just on the basis of being employed, having to be somewhere at that particular time and you have to be committed that was quite difficult for some".*

But in this area the original six local parent employees remain in their jobs and the programme now employs 30 new staff, half of them from the local community.

## Working with local employers

Although few of the local programmes studied had worked with local employers, in four areas new supermarkets had opened within or close to the local programme area. This had provided new job opportunities for Sure Start parents. In these cases the local programme, or an organisation with which it was linked, liaised with the supermarket to ensure that parents could have interviews and trial placements and to provide childcare support for these parents.

### Promising practice

Among the other ideas developed by local programmes to help parents overcome barriers to work are:

- ▶ self-help groups – 'job clubs' for parents who want to find work
- ▶ provision of references based on contact with Sure Start – for parents who have not worked recently
- ▶ Back-to-Work pack, in male and female versions, containing items such as an alarm clock, a hairdressing voucher and a calculator;
- ▶ business advisor (volunteer) helping parents to set up their own businesses, by advising on business plans and funding sources;
- ▶ training directories – covering all local training providers, courses other activities;
- ▶ offering a 'menu' of subjects to parents where, if there is sufficient interest, a training course could be provided or arranged by the local programme.

## The role of childcare in helping parents into work

Both parents and staff in local programmes reported that the provision of new childcare places would not be sufficient on its own to remove the barriers to parents finding and keeping work. The childcare must be convenient, wanted and trusted by the parent, and affordable

Parents in Sure Start local programme areas are often reluctant to use non-family daycare for their children while they are working. This is consistent with previous research evidence that parents want work that they can organise around their families and child care needs, rather than choosing a job and finding childcare to fit with it. Another problem is the cost of childcare for preschool children. Many parents found that even after taking tax credits into account, they would not be better off working once they had paid their childcare costs.

Local programmes are nevertheless aware of the benefits to children of increased confidence and self-reliance in parents and endeavour to interest parents in unexplored areas of work by offering taster sessions, introductory courses, and helping parents calculate their benefits and future prospects. Flexible childcare, like that described below, can help, too.

### Good practice

In a Sure Start local programme area there was no childcare provision suitable for working parents before the programme opened. The programme established a day nursery with Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative (NNI) funding with places for 27 children. Places are available only to parents who are working, looking for jobs, or on education or training courses. Places are means-tested, so that the more a parent earns, the higher the contribution they make, with a low minimum charge of £1.20 per day. The cost to the Sure Start programme is £175,000 a year in addition to the start-up subsidy from the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, which may raise questions about future sustainability of the service.

Providing childcare for parents while they are attending education or training sessions is one of the most important contributions that programmes make to the employability of parents, because the childcare enables them to develop their skills.

## Conclusions

A number of the Sure Start local programmes in this study have managed to demonstrate that there is no inherent conflict between improving the employability of parents and promoting child and family well-being.

Helping parents to build their confidence and improve their skills gives them more control over their lives and more choices. This in turn can lead to better relationships within the family and ultimately better outcomes for children.

None of the programmes in this study told parents that they ought to be working. But those with a positive approach emphasised that with greater confidence and skills parents could choose paid work when they were ready for it. This might not be until their children were in primary school full-time, both because parents believe this is the right way to behave, and because their childcare needs become more limited and more affordable at this point.

In programmes which take a 'lifelong learning' approach, there are large numbers of people doing courses of all kinds, some of which may put parents in a better position to find work when the children go to school. One dilemma for the local programmes is that their target for reducing the number of children in workless households refers to those aged 0-3, so that those parents who move into work when their children are aged five or more do not contribute to it. One potential solution to this would be for the target to relate to older children (perhaps those aged 5-8) for example, to recognise that investment in parents of younger children should pay off when the children are in school.

Not all Sure Start parents are equally disadvantaged but some difficulties, like being without qualifications or not speaking English well, are common in these areas and are likely to create particular disadvantages for those who wish to find work. The Sure Start local programmes that are actively offering individual support for parents who want to work or to learn new skills are doing so on an individually tailored basis and programme staff are acting as advisors and mentors to help parents overcome barriers to work.

# Improving the employability of parents in Sure Start local programmes

## Further information

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