



Sure Start: a 'joined-up' approach to reducing child poverty



Overlaps and conflicts in government ministries, a common problem in many EU Member States, often results in fragmented services for disadvantaged children and their families. Sure Start, the British Government's flagship strategy for tackling child poverty and social exclusion, developed a successful integrated approach that promises to inspire similar solutions in other EU countries. A peer review meeting took place in London in May 2006 to analyse the transferability of the programme to other Member States.

Launched in 1999, Sure Start is designed to benefit children, parents and communities by increasing the availability of childcare for all, improving young children's health and emotional development. It also supports parents in both parenting skills and employment. The programme helps develop services in disadvantaged areas and offers financial help so that parents can afford childcare. Community control, exercised through local partnerships, is the overarching principle.

Through children's centres and extended schools services, Sure Start supports families from the time

of the mother's pregnancy right through until the children reach the age of 14, or 16 in the case of those with disabilities.

■ Linking services key

When the Labour government came to power in the UK in 1997, it brought with it a new approach to providing public services: moving away from the idea that the welfare of young children is the sole responsibility of individual families and that public authorities have no role to play. In the late 1990s, one-third of children in Britain were living in poverty. Early childhood services, such as care and education, were poor by western European standards. In addition, different departments were spending money without liaising with one another.

"Creating 'joined-up government' was a major objective in the UK at the end of the 1990s," said Fred Deven, the thematic experts contracted by the European Commission to introduce the debates and report on the meeting. "The innovative aspect and success of Sure Start lies in this joined-up approach. It means that local authorities, health services, job centres, local communities, public agencies and voluntary and private sector organisations all work together to provide services that benefit children and their families in an integrated way."

Local Sure Start programmes were initially launched in the most deprived areas of England. By early May 2006, 846 children's centres covering approximately 660,000 children were in operation. The government is committed to creating a children's centre for every community – 3,500 by 2010. Between 2004 and 2008 the Department is planning to spend a total of £3.2 billion on children's centres and Sure Start local programmes. The ultimate aim of the programme is to provide universal services to every community in the country.





■ Common challenges, common solutions

France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland are grappling with similar challenges to those faced by the UK in the 1990s. With help from the EU's Social Protection and Social Inclusion Process, experts from these countries had the opportunity to evaluate Sure Start, look at sample schemes and discuss if some or all of the approach could be used in their own countries.

One fact to emerge strongly from comparative analysis in all countries was that help for disadvantaged children often cuts across various ministries, as well as across the specialisations and interests of different professional groups. The resulting overlaps and conflicts often lead to fragmented services that are less than optimal for helping children and families in need. Sure Start's integrated approach was seen as a successful, and by and large transferable, means of promoting greater cooperation.

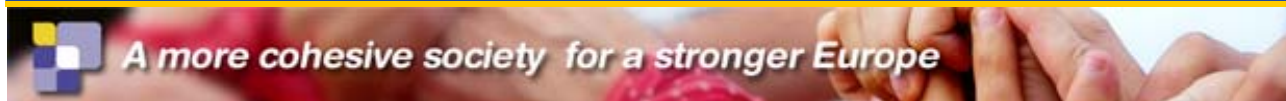
"These discussions have shown that it is necessary to break down the barriers between different agencies," said Hugues Feltesse, from the EU's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. "This is not just a matter of writing new rules. It implies a change of culture." The peer review brought out a number of points about the Sure Start programme's transferability to other countries:

- Sure Start focuses on child development and the global well-being of the children. This was seen as a positive value that could be transferred to different national contexts overcoming the limits of the only health protection constraints.
- Increased cooperation between the various groups of professionals is equally important. Joint training could be provided for the various professionals involved in childcare, in order to promote networking, team working in a multi-

professional approach and partnership with poor people.

- The joined-up, holistic approach taken by Sure Start's new children's centres was of great interest to participants from countries where services were more fragmented. The existence also of outreach services, the work with all the parents in the area with a snowball effect, the parent to parent support, the flexibility of open hours and activities, specific meetings with teen-agers, the presence of professionals belonging to same ethnic minorities than families in the area, were highly appreciated.
- Sure Start's emphasis on evaluation and monitoring is an element that participants were keen to recommend. Personnel also need to be helped to self-monitor and self-evaluate. Longitudinal assessment of results proving the cost effectiveness remains a challenge to meet.
- The level of parental involvement in Sure Start local programmes, notably through the partnership boards, was praised. To build a long term relationship with families living in poverty in such a way to foster trust is a key issue. Parents must be kept informed of the child's development. Sure Start centres have developed useful systems for doing so.





- The Sure Start programme incorporates some freedom of local action but also a level of control. This combination was seen as a useful way of promoting standards.
- Accountability to the various stakeholders (parents, employees, policy-makers, funders) is important in ensuring value for money.
- Interest was shown in Sure Start's role in helping parents into employment as a means of tackling poverty. Some doubts were expressed as to whether a combination of childcare and employment promotion would work in every national context. However a strong partnership between child centres, job centres, training services, enterprises could be interesting to promote. Decent wages, sufficient to bring up a family, are needed in order to motivate people. Training opportunities and childcare also have to be upgraded.
- Financial constraints are a sore point for all peer countries. If Sure Start centres were set up, would there be any guarantee of continued funding after the first 2-3 years? And in countries with limited financial means, is there not a danger that a Sure Start approach would create a few centres of excellence amidst a general lack of coverage?

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Geoff Scammell from the UK's Department for Work and Pensions, said discussions that were made possible by the Social Protection and Social Inclusion Process had shown far more similarities than differences between the countries involved. "Whatever the national context, the problems are similar and the solutions are similar. So the

exchanges of national experience have been useful for all concerned."

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Project information

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