



United Kingdom 2006

Sure Start

Comment Paper, Eurochild AISBL



On behalf of
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

Sure Start Eurochild AISBL's comments

Ene Tomberg & Anja Härtwig
Eurochild AISBL

This short assessment has been prepared by EUROCHILD AISBL, which is an active network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Eurochild's work is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Eurochild AISBL is funded by the European Commission within the Community Action Programme to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The association aims to promote the welfare and rights of children and young people by:

- producing, developing and sharing information on policy and practice;
- monitoring and influencing policy development at the European level;
- developing interest groups and partnerships between members in European countries;
- developing partnerships with other European associations that share common goals;
- influencing and making recommendations to international institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the United Nations;
- supporting and developing the capacity of members;
- empowering children and young people to make their views heard.

At the heart of Eurochild's activities is the Child Poverty Work Programme. A key element of this Programme is the assessment of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs/Inclusion) from the perspective of children and young people as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1. The Sure Start Programme

1.1 Description

Sure Start began in 1999/2000 as a centralised programme, with 540M GBP set aside for partnerships between the voluntary sector, parents and local authority services. There had to be an engagement of the NGO sector (and parents) in the planning and delivery of services, as well

as co-operation between the statutory agencies. The joining up of services was seen to be the key, and the initiative started out as being about changing the culture of the way people worked – breaking down professional and agency barriers, to keep a focus on the child, and promote co-operation rather than professional or sectional jealousy. This initiative did not create new services, but was giving an incentive to already existing programmes.

The joining up of services was to be achieved through the establishment of a Sure Start Partnership, which were set up in the most deprived areas. The centres it created were supposed to be “pram walking distance” for parents. Initially they offered joined up services for children, but this focus on children has gradually shifted to now being a part of the anti-poverty and welfare to work agenda (enabling parents to get back to work, offering job advice, etc.).

1.2 NGO involvement

It took a long time for NGOs to get fully involved in the programme in the beginning. But once it started, 16% of the initiatives were led by the voluntary sector. Now centres for Sure Start, such as “the Children’s Fund” (for 5-11 year olds), which are led together with the voluntary sector, are being developed. They are often going through local authorities and since the Children’s Act (2004), each local authority needs to develop a children’s approach, involving the other sectors.

The NGO involvement at the early stages went very well. But the question is now, whether it can continue that way in the future? NGO involvement will certainly be there in the delivery of services, but shouldn’t they also be more involved in the planning phase? Do they have the capacity to be involved and will the local authorities make sure those capacities are developed?

1.3 Comparison with other countries

According to our member organisation in The Netherlands, this kind of programme could be useful for the country, because it focuses on a more coherent structure for the pre-school age than the ones existing there. In The Netherlands a lot of attention is given to the educational disadvantages of children under 4 (the age when children start going to school). However, the services are much divided and there is no single governmental strategy.

Existing services in The Netherlands are:

- day crèches and home care: for which parents can receive a tax credit (means tested) and the employers need to pay 1/6 of the costs each. - So this service (0 -4 years old) can only be used by working parents (mostly middle and higher incomes).
- play schools: only half days and mostly used by parents where one parent (mostly the mother) is staying home.
- the so called *Voorschool* (“pre-school”, a new development), which is like the play groups, but where educational programmes are being offered.

These programmes are continued in the first years of primary school and are also meant for migrant children.

Due to the lack of a pedagogical and educational strategy for children under 4 by the government, the services available are very scattered. Poverty among children is not being recognised as a priority issue by the government either. Therefore an overall strategy like Sure Start could be really interesting for the country, because it would mean commitment by the government, such as in the UK.

This can certainly also be said for other EU countries, for whom Sure Start could be used as a good practice example to follow, in order to build, strengthen or deepen cooperation between the different sectors involved. One means of spreading this kind of comprehensive strategies to the other member states and check on the actual implementation could be through the annual NAPs/Inclusion reports by the governments. As Eurochild AISBL has stated in its position on the new Guidelines for preparing National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion, children and the eradication of child poverty should be one of the priorities in each of these reports.

2. Assessment

1.1 Strengths

- involvement of parents in the planning phase,
- involvement of the voluntary sector/NGOs,
- evolution and development of the initiative (for example: initially no money or time was foreseen to setting up the partnerships. But it was seen from experience that this was necessary and resources were made available to build the partnership and cover the costs that would have prohibited parents participation (ex: travel to/from the meeting place),
- Government commitment,
- not create new services and administrative procedures, but give incentives to already existing programmes,
- breaking down professional and agency barriers, keep a focus on the child, promote co-operation rather than professional or sectional jealousy.

1.2 Weaknesses and Questions raised

- In 2005 the programme has been “mainstreamed”: Sure Start children’s centres are now managed through the local authorities (LAs) within their budget. This presents certain challenges: LAs do not all have the same approach to participation (so the partnership approach doesn’t always work).

- This also presents a risk to the voluntary sector, especially to those organisations who were involved right from the beginning in the setting up and delivery of the Sure Start centres: there is no guarantee that the LAs will continue to fund their activities. So they have potentially built up the capacity with no long term guarantee of continuity.
- In England at the moment there is a real thrust and encouragement for the NGO sector to deliver more public services on behalf of statutory bodies. Would this be likely/desirable in other EU member states?
- Missing: children's participation and involvement into this kind of processes concerning them.
- Reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child needed.