

United Kingdom 2006

Sure Start

Short Report



On behalf of

European Commission

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The Peer Review was held in London on 4-5 May 2006 and hosted by the British Department for Work and Pensions. In addition to the host country, six peer countries participated in the review: France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, and Poland together with stakeholder representatives from ATD Forth World and Eurochild, and representatives from the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

The UK government's Sure Start programme integrates early education with childcare, health and family support services, outreach to parents and employment advice for disadvantaged families.

Sure Start secures better outcomes for children, parents and communities by increasing the availability of childcare for all children, improving young children's health and emotional development and supporting the parents, both as parents and in their aspirations towards employment. This is done by assisting the development of services in disadvantaged areas, while providing financial help so that parents can afford childcare.

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). Sure Start operates in England only. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own separate provisions.

Sure Start is innovative in its approach, which is more "joined up" and responsive to the needs of children and families. The Department for Education and Skills works with local authorities, health services, job centres, local communities, public agencies and voluntary and private sector organisations. In this way, it ensures delivery, through children's centres and extended schools, of:

- free early education for all three- and four-year-olds
- affordable, quality childcare and after-school activities in every area
- early learning opportunities integrated with day care for under-5s
- health and family support services, particularly in disadvantaged areas where they are most needed.

It also works with parents to build aspirations for employment and for their children's education.

Transferability

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.
- In many countries, different ministries and departments have different responsibilities for childcare, and often do not cooperate as effectively as might be wished. In particular a stronger partnership between child protection and child centres might be promoted. Sure Start's integrated approach was seen as a successful, and by and large transferable, means of promoting greater cooperation. Participants felt that the integration of services was not currently happening in their countries, but they would like to move towards it step by step. This was an idea that they definitely wanted to take back home with them.
- 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.
- 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?
- Accountability to the various stakeholders (parents, employees, policy-makers, funders) is important in ensuring value for money.
- More information is needed on the functioning of Sure Start programmes in rural areas, where deprivation is at its greatest in many peer countries. England, with its relatively small rural population, has little advice to offer on this particular point, which could usefully form the subject of further international cooperation.
- 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.
- Given the scale of such programmes, and the level of investment involved, it is important to have the means of disseminating experiences and best practice.
- At the EU level, child poverty concerns should be integrated into the 2006-2008 National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPS/Inclusion) within the new National Strategic Reports on social protection and social inclusion, but also into the EU's Lisbon reforms. Tackling the intergenerational inheritance of poverty is clearly relevant to growth and to future employment. EU structural funds, notably the European Social Fund, could also support the implementation of reforms.