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# Sure Start

Discussion Paper, Fred Deven



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

## Sure Start Discussion Paper

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### Preface

1. The Peer Review of the UK Sure Start is work in progress. It is felt that the Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) represent a quite recent and daunting enterprise to tackle real challenges in British society. At present, the experiences and materials to be reviewed are substantial both in number and in kind ([www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)).
2. This Discussion paper therefore also remains work in progress as well viewing that the amount of information and materials continues to become available. It nevertheless aims to touch upon major issues and to flag up questions for reflection and discussion at the Peer Review meeting (4-5 May).
3. The main aim of the Discussion paper is to provide
  - ◆ *“a balanced view of the good practice under consideration incl. the aspects of transferability to other Member States and its possible contribution to European policy development”*
  - ◆ *“an assessment of the effectiveness of the policy from an independent point of view”*
4. Besides the practices of the SSLPs as such, the project greatly benefits from an extensive component of monitoring and evaluation (see [www.ness.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk)). In this respect, the Thematic expert gratefully acknowledges the critical information provided through the Synthesis Paper on the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) (Professor E. Melhuish, pp. 3-16). The relevance of previous reports from the 2004-2005 round of EC Peer Review in the Field of Social Inclusion Policies is also acknowledged. Finally, the Thematic expert also used (research) work considered especially relevant for this EC Peer Review (see References).

### Starting Points

5. The British Government included the eradication of child poverty as a key aim in its policy from 1997 on setting at first the most ambitious goal of eradicating child poverty in the UK by 2020. In this context, the UK Sure Start was launched as the Government's “flagship programme” to tackle this multifaceted problem. SSLPs represents a daunting enterprise to tackle substantial challenges (i.e. Cohen et al., 2004; Moss, 2001).
6. At present, the policies, programmes and materials to be reviewed are substantial in number and in kind. They apply in England only. Responsibility for early education and childcare in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland rests with the separate devolved administrations.
7. It is commonly observed that clear arrangements are mostly lacking for monitoring and assessing the implementation and impact of programmes within EU Member States on an ongoing basis. By contrast, the UK Sure Start Unit has allocated substantial funding for a strong capacity of highly skilled researchers and team members to provide for the specialised expertise (i.e. Rutter, 2006).

Although the assessment of parenting programmes and early childhood services is much more common in the Anglosaxon tradition (i.e. Barnett, 2003, 2006; Quinton, 2004) it cannot be taken for granted in the context of the EU-25 Member States.

## **Part A THE POLICY DEBATE AT EUROPEAN LEVEL**

### **A.1 The policy framework and the related policy debate at European level**

8. The fight against poverty and social exclusion remains a major challenge for the European Commission and for all EU Member States. Among the seven key policy priorities adopted recently several are reflected in the aims of the SSLPs
  - ◆ Increasing labour market participation
  - ◆ Tackling disadvantages in education and training
  - ◆ Eliminating child poverty
  - ◆ Improving access to quality services
9. Eradicating child poverty remains among the key policy priorities identified in the 2005 Joint Report on social Protection and Social Inclusion. It is said that *“Particular focus is given to early intervention and early education in support of disadvantaged children; and enhancing income support and assistance to families and single parents. Several countries also put increasing emphasis on promoting the rights of the child as a basis for policy development”*.

### **A.2 An assessment of the contribution of the good practice to the European policy debate**

10. Overall, SSLPs can be looked at as a good example of a strong commitment and effort to curb a detrimental level of (child) poverty and poor early childhood provision in a Western country with such a high GDP.
11. Since 1997, the UK government demonstrates a new and strong commitment to give the early childhood years the attention and efforts they deserve in the best interest of children and of society as well (e.g. return of investments). The UK provision of early childhood services (care and education), starting from a Western European low base, meanwhile benefits from a quite radical reform of policy and from significant public funding.

## **Part B DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE POLICY**

### **B.1 Background**

12. Following substantial increases in the child poverty rate in the 1980s and early 1990s (with figures well above those of other EU Member States) the UK is catching up in recent years although the proportion of the UK population at risk of poverty still remains higher than the EU average (in 2001: 19% versus 15% for EU-15). This remains remarkable as the UK economy has continued to grow ahead of overall EU growth rates (GDP in 2004: 3.2% versus 2.3% for the EU25), and the UK combines high employment rates with a low unemployment.

13. These figures need to be compared more in detail with those from other (European) countries with similar macro-economic characteristics (i.e. EC Social Action Programme, 2006; UNICEF, 2005). Comparing UK data with those for all other EU Member States is more difficult but remains relevant (Hoelscher, 2006).
14. This may be understood as the outcome of a sustained period of relative lack of a sufficient number of early childhood services (with minimum standards of quality) more typical for a liberal welfare state regime. In the 1990s a long period of UK government indifference was followed by somewhat more concern and involvement by the administration (1993-1996). The Labour administration (1997-2001) gave way to a noticeable acceleration and a new generation of government-funded integrated services, especially in (a minority of) disadvantaged areas.
15. As stated in the introduction of various reports "Sure Start is a cornerstone of the Government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion". It is widely recognized that the Labour Government introduced a new social agenda and has brought a new policy interest to the field. By doing so, it left an ideological position commonly held in Anglo-Saxon countries (at present still in the USA), that infants and children under school-age are the sole responsibility of their parents, and that the public authorities have no role unless children are at risk (i.e. Cohen et al., 2004; Melhuish & Petrogiannis, 2006).

## **B.2 Goals and Target Groups of the Policy**

16. Which aspects of the EU strategy to combat social exclusion are addressed by the policy? It aims to improve the health and well being of young children under 4 and their parents living in the 20% most disadvantaged areas in the country. The local Sure Start programmes (SSLPs) are intended to achieve better outcomes for children, parents and their local communities by promoting children's development and increasing parental employment.
17. All local SSLPs are expected to provide core services of outreach and home visiting, support for families and parents, support for good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children, primary and community health care, advice about child health and development and family health, and support for people with special needs, including assistance in accessing specialised services. Districts for SSLPs were selected centrally, based on the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Index of Multiple Deprivation. The Sure Start catchment areas were selected locally in response to the needs of the community.

## **B.3 The institutional arrangements and procedures of implementation: From planning through implementation and delivery, to monitoring and evaluation**

18. Started in 1999, the UK Government invested substantially into these programmes or services (see documents of the National Audit Office). This new programme was allocated a new budget line under HM Treasury. ([www.hm-treasury.gov.uk](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk)). The Sure Start programme holds a supply side funding (see below) as well as a demand side funding as parents are assisted in paying for childcare through the Tax Credit system. The authorities provide over £ 2.4m a day. The Pre Budget Report 2004 announced substantial extensions to the Government's support for childcare costs through the tax credit system. The limits increased to £ 175 per week for 1 child and £ 300 for two or more children from April 2005. The maximum proportion of costs that can be claimed rises to 80% from April 2006 (G. Scammell, DfWP, personal communication).

19. At the end of 2005, the childcare element of Working Tax Credit (WTC) is benefiting over 356,000 lower and middle income families; 67% are lone parents and 33% couples. This is twice the number that benefited from the previous Childcare Tax Credit at its peak (7x more the number that benefited from the system operating in 1999).
20. The SSLPs expenditure include capital and revenue expenditure (see Appendix, Table 1). From 2006-2007, individual Sure Start funding streams were rationalised into the General Sure Start Grant including, for the first time, one single capital block making funding no longer separately ring-fenced and separately identifiable.
21. At **national level**, the Sure Start Unit provides advice, guidance and performance targets for local authorities. The Unit became an integral part of the government's newly formed Children, Young People and Families Directorate, within the Department of Education and Skills (DfES). The unit has its HQ in London and a regional structure, with team based in each government office for the regions. **Regional** teams maintain direct relationships with local programmes. Strategic development officers support local authorities, while programme development officers work more closely with those delivering Sure Start services.
22. Community control is consistently emphasised in the development of SSLPs. The control is to be exercised through local partnerships. They provide local community influence for the design of each SSLP. There is no specification of how to provide services, only what they should achieve. The range of services delivered by a local programme reflects local need, but will include core services (sub 19). All programmes must ensure that their services are accessible for those with special needs.
23. **Local authorities** have strategic responsibility for the delivery of local programmes, and must plan their development in consultation with parents and other key partners, including primary care trusts and other health service providers. All SSLPs are required to undertake an evaluation of their programme. For this, they can request support from the NESS.

#### **B.4 Any intended future adaptations to the policy**

24. A substantial adaptation occurred from March 2006 on as all SSLPs need to be turned into **Children's Centres**. All these local programmes are to become Sure Start children's centres providing integrated services to parents and children up to the age of five (see Appendix, Table 3). But for the 3,500 Children's centres planned throughout England a significant difference may develop between those in SSLPs ('poor' areas) and the rest of England as the latter will not have childcare and education as key roles.
25. They will bring together various services, including early education, childcare, family support, employment advice and health. The introduction of Children's Centres in Sure Start and other deprived areas represent an important and innovative policy development. The overall idea of providing integrated services to all families in a catchment area, an idea being around for some time now was given sustained and substantial government backing.
26. In Phase 1 (2004-2006), 136 of a total of 150 Local Authorities were involved in the programme. The majority of Sure Start Children's centres were developed from existing provision like SSLPs, Early Excellence Centres, neighbourhood nurseries and maintained nursery schools. They were developed to serve families living in the 20% most disadvantaged wards (based on the IMD 2000).

By end of Phase 2 (2006-2008), all 150 Local Authorities involved in the programme have to ensure all of the most disadvantaged families have access to children's centres services as well as begin to provide services to families living outside these areas in the 70% less disadvantaged wards.

27. Moreover, the Government published the Childcare Bill in November 2005; the first ever legislation in UK devoted to services for under fives and childcare. It is planned to be passed in Parliament in September 2006. The Bill will place new duties on local authorities to improve child outcomes, to provide information to parents and to secure sufficient childcare for children in their area.
28. Additional to the investments in early childhood care already made, the UK Government plans to increase its support for families between now and 2010 either by starting new services or by increasing the entitlement such as
  - ◆ increasing the provision of free minimum part-time early education for all 3 and 4 years olds from 33 to 38 weeks (April 2006)
  - ◆ the possibility for parents to claim back 80% of their childcare costs through the Working Tax Credit (April 2006)
  - ◆ the extension of paid maternity leave to 9 months (April 2007)
  - ◆ to open one-third of all secondary schools 8am-6pm

Finally, initiatives have been announced to improve the quality of the children's workforce and the inspection regime (see "*Choice for parents, the best start for children; a 10 years strategy for childcare*" - UK Government, 2004).

## Part C THE RESULTS SO FAR

### C.1 The quantitative results of the policy so far

29. This part obviously draws upon the analyses and results documented by the NESS staff in various reports, especially as summed up in the synthesis paper of the national expert, recently made available by the host country. At present, for the sake of parsimony, we refer the readers to these most valuable sources of information (see Preface 4. and 5.) as well as to critical assessments of the NESS itself by other British scholars (i.e. Barnett, 2006; Cohen et al., 2004; Hey & Brandford, 2006; Rutter, 2006). Moreover, many more (themed) studies are in progress and will be published later on in 2006.
30. The SSLPs are spread across England and based in the most disadvantaged areas (especially urban areas including inner city estates). Of the 524 SSLPs operating at present, 15 are based in identifiable rural areas (see Annex, Table 2). These programmes provide services to over 400,000 children under four. Individual programmes vary in size, on average reaching around 750 children (minimum 300– maximum 1,500).
31. The UK Sure Start does not keep information on the numbers of staff employed by programmes. Staffing arrangements depend on individual local need but typically includes a mix of part time and full time staff as well as staff seconded into programmes from partner organisations both from the statutory and voluntary sectors.
32. It is said by the NESS that three core questions need to guide the overall evaluation of Sure Start: do existing services change? (How and if so, for which populations and under what conditions?), are delivered services improved, and do children, families and communities benefit (idem)? The

NESS aims to address these questions through five components: implementation evaluation, impact evaluation, local community context analysis, cost-benefit analysis and support for local evaluations. ([www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/methodology](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/methodology))

### Changes in communities

33. The changes in the *characteristics* of communities served by SSLPs after 4 years are accepted as real changes (to the child population, levels of deprivation and employment, child health, child protection, educational achievement and crime).
34. The reduction in the proportion of children under 4 living in poverty in SSLPs areas is considered significant (between 2000/1 and 2003/4) and significantly greater than the reduction in England overall. But considerable *variation amongst SSLPs areas* is noted in the changes seen. Factors such as the homogeneity or heterogeneity in housing, social class and ethnic make-up seem to be important predictors of more or less change. Moreover, because SSLPs are not the only area-based initiatives operating in many SSLP areas, any detected effect could be as well a function of some other area-based initiative.

### Impact on family functioning

35. Overall, *effects* of SSLPs on children and families proved to be *limited and small*. Considering the differential effects (beneficial and adverse) for sub-populations it is suggested that among deprived families those with comparatively better personal resources were better able to take advantage of SSLP services and resources. This may express the Matthew effect and hints to a kind of threshold, to a level of deprivation not to be trespassed in order for such intervention programmes to succeed.

### In general

36. The overall picture may not seem that bright. On some issues it may even be considered rather gloomy. But after four years of work, only short-term effects can be measured. It remains too early to measure medium-term effects and outcomes, not to mention possible 'sleeper' effects (cf. evaluation research on childcare services). A number of crucial preconditions need time to develop (for example, building trust or confidence).
37. Besides, certain effects and developments considered relevant by some stakeholders in these complex processes may more easily be overlooked. For example, the popularity of the services among parents may contribute strongly to the long-term process of their empowerment. Moreover, although young children are clearly targetted by SSLPs little effort is done to include them as *subjects* into the evaluations appreciating, however, the specific and great methodological challenges this poses for researchers.
38. We also consider the monitoring and evaluation of impact and outcomes of such multifaceted interventions on children and families at best "Targetting a moving mark", especially when new policy decisions (e.g. Children's Centres) have to be included as well. The NESS team core statement "What is the effect of SSLPs, *all other things being equal*" however expresses a positivistic paradigm with implications for all what they consider relevant and measurable.
39. At the start of UK Sure Start the baseline situation was almost unbelievable poor for a Member State with such a high GDP. Sure Start services at best have contributed to one major aim, to substantially reduce child poverty. Recent falls in child poverty levels are certainly also due to financial redistribution (i.e. improved benefits to families with children). Levels of income inequality remaining high also need to be considered. Targetting the efforts to young children and parents living in the 20% most disadvantaged areas in England was very understandable. It nevertheless

necessitated a deployment of substantial amounts of new services involving (much) more time to be set up than expected (cf. “*Setting up a completely new form of early years service presented considerable problems to newly formed SSLPs*”) as well as higher expenditures.

40. As a whole, by developing SSLPs and more recently Children’s Centres the policy statement has strongly been made that UK public authorities at present do really care about (disadvantaged) children and families. This reform of early childhood services is perhaps not that radical as in most of the country the reliance on a private market in ‘childcare’ remains. Policy measures such as demand subsidy to lower income parents and a strong targeting to poor families and areas reflects a social investment in a liberal welfare state. There remains of course much room for further progress largely due to the very ambitious aims set at the start of this programme. Till now, NESS already provided critical analyses pointing to a number of difficulties and ways for improvement.

## C.2 Other results and achievements of the policy

41. The NESS was commissioned in 2000 (e.g. *after* the UK Sure Start programme started), be it by the same public authority commissioning Sure Start “to undertake a multifaceted evaluation of SSLPs. NESS can nevertheless be considered a valuable **asset** of the overall UK Sure Start programme. It constitutes a process within the process worth of a peer review as well. With respect to the transferability of NESS as a separate exercise in UK Sure Start, it would be relevant to consider the feasibility of this additional work, for example in the context of the EC Peer review work in the field of social inclusion policies (see C.4).
42. NESS greatly facilitates a *thorough and authoritative monitoring and analysis* of work in progress. Till now, it developed an impressive number of extensive (themed) reports which already document various parts of the UK Sure Start process and its outcomes. In the context of UK Sure Start, it may be relevant to screen the type of data collection of NESS more thoroughly by looking at the extent to which the philosophical and theoretical foundation of programs is clearly articulated, whether all stakeholders are equally involved and different perspectives are taken into account (e.g. the perspective of *children*), how families *feel* about their situation and the support made available to them, etc. ([www.ness.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk)).
43. The UK Sure Start programme also seems to have triggered changes and new developments in various UK Departments and Ministerial responsibilities. Sure Start was established following the Comprehensive Spending Review in 1997 “Cross departmental review of provision for young children”. At present, this new government Unit is led by a Minister for Sure Start in the Department for *Education and Skills* and the Department of *Work and Pensions*. Meanwhile, the Sure Start programme needs to be set in the UK government’s much wider and ambitious Ten Year Childcare Strategy (see “Every Child Matters”) becoming part of a larger move to more integrated policy and provision.
44. The Unit works with local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, Jobcentre Plus, local communities and voluntary and private sector organisations. Consultation with and involvement of the various actors has been developed considerably within the SSLPs. Although the action is confined into catchment areas a larger diffusion of the principles and practices of the SSLPs may be expected. It is worth investigating in more detail the possible spin-offs of this awareness raising (expectations and frustrations).

### C.3 An assessment of the obstacles and constraints encountered, and an indication of the factors determining success.

45. The NESS analyses point to various critical factors which seem to make a difference in terms of impact of effectiveness of the SSLPs. For example :
- ◆ Programme Manager (pivotal role)
  - ◆ (Type of) Lead Agency
  - ◆ Amount of personal resources (“children from *relatively* less disadvantaged families appeared to benefit somewhat from living in SSLP communities” ... “In contrast, children from *relatively* more disadvantaged families appeared to be adversely affected”
  - ◆ A ‘*critical mass*’ of initiatives required in an area in order to make a substantial change in outcomes at the level of the community
  - ◆ Commitment to robust *consultation* can play a vital role in the delivery of local services
  - ◆ Considerable problems were encountered by newly formed SSLPs to set up a completely new form of early childhood service.
  - ◆ Participation on partnerships took more time and effort than anticipated
  - ◆ Sustained efforts and attention is needed to facilitating access to services
  - ◆ Good service delivery seems to be highly dependent on successful inter-agency collaboration.
46. The results and experiences point to the advantages of delivering universal based services for children and families. But the overall project work is confronted with clear *capacity* problems. The current workforce seems to be insufficient in size and sometimes in specific skills needed.
47. As SSLPs are designed to operate within restrictive boundaries this may raise problems for children and families alike (e.g. increasing the risk of stigma). Area boundaries may exclude existing services, just outside the SSLP boundary. At present, for the development of Children’s Centres, the rigidity of these boundaries seem to be reduced.
48. Trust works out to be fundamental to parental engagement. Building trust is a long-term task for programmes, with cultural and ethnic dimensions that need to be taken into account. The overall project planning and funding needs a time frame in line with the substantial challenges and the type of targets set for UK Sure Start.

### C.4 An assessment of the transferability to and learning value for other Member States

49. Transferability is thought to be more easy or feasible if policies and programmes have single goals, simple problems, few side-effects, actors with high levels of information and/or outcomes which are easily to predict. As these conditions hardly apply to UK Sure Start it is consequently considered more difficult to discuss policy transfer.
50. However, as the UK government still holds a centralised model (setting the guidelines for Sure Start, providing the necessary funds) but develops SSLPs (leaving the implementation to the local level) this represents an interesting experiment of social engineering (i.e. developing appropriate infrastructure, efforts to join up services, the management of various actors and stakeholders) providing worthwhile *processes and mechanisms* valuable to learn from as well.

#### C.4.1. From UK to EU Member States

51. Taking into consideration that the United Kingdom remains a prototype of a European liberal welfare state regime the UK Sure Start programme provides a strong example for EU Member States operating under a comparable logic how to develop and implement a big programme with a substantial new budget. In this respect, it is very relevant to learn from the way Sure Start is developed and implemented in Hungary.
52. All Member States struggling with similar levels of (child) poverty, strong regional disparities in deprivation of parents or inadequate childcare provision can find inspiration in UK Sure Start. Moreover, as the NESS monitoring and evaluation work documents in detail specific dimensions of the overall programme, Member States wishing to improve one dimension of their local services (e.g. *reaching* disadvantaged families, *joining up* services) can turn these NESS reports for inspiration. This also holds when they can only earmark a lesser proportion of their GDP for such programmes.
53. For EU Member States operating under the logics of a different type of welfare state (including different models of care and education) it provides an interesting 'test case' to monitor how an approach which is familiar to them (e.g. to deliver universal and good quality early childhood services) works out in a macrosocial setting which differs (strongly) from their own. It may reveal that such service provision does not need all conditions (e.g. infrastructure, staff capacity, qualifications) they consider essential to succeed.
54. Although important differences in societal context may seem to make comparisons difficult the NESS component can be especially relevant for Italy where "*periodic and integrated evaluation*" was also part of the objectives (see *EC Peer Review 2005 "Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence"*). Although the Law 285/97 was referred to as the first Italian law foreseeing an institutionalized evaluation the review documents that it was not clear on the way to implement this requirement. After 3 years, for example, only 40% of the local actors carried out the foreseen evaluation. Later on, evaluation activities have been better specified through the *National Centre of Documentation and Analysis for Childhood and Adolescence*" (e.g. technical assistance, handbooks of guidelines, examples of ex-ante and ex-post evaluation).

#### C.4.2. From EU Member States to UK

55. Still taken into account the observation sub 50. We first turn to a selected number of experiences and practices reviewed in the 2004-2005 round of EC Peer Reviews on social inclusion (see [www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net](http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.net)) bearing some relevance for the UK Sure Start project.
56. The work in **Finland** on citizens' social support network models (HYVE) represents a model for partnership among all actors. It builds on local partnerships providing new forms of support and social services in partnership between NGOs and authorities at regional and local level. Within the broad national development objectives, local targets are specified through dialogue between all relevant actors. The mix of funds and pooled budgeting may also be relevant to the UK context. The review concluded that it is perfectly in line with EU pronouncements on governance and horizontal and vertical subsidiarity. The project work in **Ireland** on money advice and budgeting also seems relevant as locally based companies help people to cope with debt and take control of their finances.

57. Although that UK Sure Start focuses on children below 4, its concern of supporting positive parenting could also benefit from the comprehensive experience in **Norway** having developed a *nationwide* programme including services and support for all parents to further good parenting.
58. Finally, still at the risk that the type of welfare state regime (especially its models of care and education) differ too strongly, the UK programme could turn to those EU Member States having developed different views of the role of public authorities, service provision and child welfare. Some Nordic countries may inspire Sure Start in the nextcoming years with their provision of universal welfare services (incl. childcare), impressive policies on leave (incl. promoting the involvement of fathers) but also with the often vigorous debate on the place of children in society and on the meaning of childhood framed in understandings of equality and democracy.
59. In a relatively short period of time, the UK policy has already come a long way in its efforts to tackle child poverty and enhance child development. Till now, however, the practices in other EU Member States only had a minor impact on developments in the UK. Influences from abroad have remained minor, with policies driven by domestic ideology, although noticing that UK Sure Start was strongly inspired by *USA Early Head Start*. One may wonder why UK authorities would continue indeed to turn only to the USA for inspiration. Whereas the provision and the use of good quality early childhood services are so characteristic for various EU Member States, most research data regarding early childhood services stem from datasets in the United States and the UK. If it were not for the dominant US position in research, would UK public authorities really remain interested in these findings collected in contexts of rather poor childcare services, mostly unpaid forms of leave and persistent high levels of inequality among children?
60. It is therefore felt that the UK Sure Start could benefit more from comprehensive comparisons such as the 4th OECD study 'Babies and Bosses' (OECD, 2005) where a variety of measures to reconcile work and family life are compared in Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This study, for example, estimates that average parental fees for childcare in the UK range from 45 to 75% - 2 to 4 times more than in Finland and Québec (Canada), and 4 to 8 times more than in Sweden. Thus, it often does not pay for both parents to hold down full-time jobs. The study also recommends that the UK Government apply quality controls systems to more childcare facilities to ensure that day-care workers meet stringent qualifications and give home-based childminders access to support services provided by local Children's Centres.
61. Time has come for the UK to look more systematically at other Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policies and practices within the European Union, more particularly those based on different types of welfare state regimes such as those of the Nordic member states or from Western Europe such as France. They have developed national systems of publicly-funded and relatively well resourced ECCE services, together with a central system of quality evaluation. The extensive evidence of the benefits of preschool education, and the cost-benefit evidence supports the proposition that universal preschool education is an important part of the infrastructure for economic development (i.e. improving the development of human capital). The evidence on the effects of childcare for 0-3 years old for disadvantaged children indicates that high quality childcare can produce benefits, particularly for cognitive development and for language.
62. Early Childhood Care and Education policies and practices can only be understood in their historical and socio-cultural context. The development of such services usually suffers in countries experiencing socio-economic problems giving a low priority to ECCE. The higher levels of public commitment in the UK has resulted in a new social agenda and innovations that deserve due attention. The current system of ECCE in England seems to experience turbulence as it struggles to

find new patterns of service provision that suits better the needs of the most deprived and of children at risk of poverty.

## Part D THE POLICY DEBATE IN THE UK

### D.1 An assessment of the arguments of the different interest groups.

63. Although this part is considered very relevant it is more difficult to develop for the thematic expert. A number of *statements* are collected which may highlight the atmosphere within the UK related to Sure Start.

“Changes driven by a strong and active national government, with HM Treasury seeking to apply some coherence across policies in order to focus them on what it considers to be vital domestic policy goals: eradicating poverty and social exclusion, increasing employment, enhancing competitiveness. In most of UK, early childhood services operate as a market, split between ‘childcare’ (consisting mostly of for-profit nurseries and childminders competing for ‘customers’) and ‘early education’ (a mix of public sector schools and private providers). Parents largely fund the former, the state the latter”.

“Sure Start programmes are in areas that are too poor to entice private providers. In these instances (of what the government terms ‘market failure’) the state is forced to intervene; hence, Children’s Centres, which will set an example of integrated, inclusive and universal provision in stark contrast to the situation elsewhere”.

“Support targeted by area deprivation, as in SS Local Programmes in the UK, meant that seriously deprived families living outside the designated areas went without services and support”.

“In many ways the most notable characteristic of both Sure Start and the childcare partnerships is that they have in certain respects locked local authorities in as providers within a mixed economy of services, and somewhat constrained the development of integration at a local level”.

\* “An extraordinary degree of central direction and regulation, by either government departments or agencies, reflected in an immense weight of documents distributed downwards setting out how policy should be implemented, and controls that attempt to ensure delivery and compliance”.

### D.2 Main questions and areas of debate on the policy within the UK, or at European level.

64. Stating the obvious, it is essential to frame the discussion in its proper policy context taking into account the specific economic, historical, political and social characteristics to recognise similarities and differences in each of the participating countries for comparative purposes. The Thematic expert did not yet map all relevant statistics, data and policies as provided for example in the ‘Learning from families’ of the comparative project Home-Start International (2005).

65. SSLPs undoubtedly have triggered large interest in national and regional media in the UK. More generally, the issue of (child) poverty keeps great potential for media attention, perhaps all too often in negative (in tabloids, ‘news’ may equal negative results such as “targets not met!”). As an

outsider, it is more difficult to be in touch with this important dimension of the work as it may severely impact on further policy developments.

66. At the same time, the UK Sure Start may still too much be based on the conviction that there are *technical solutions* ('interventions') for problems that derive from conflicts in the economic and social realms of (UK) society (i.e. Davies et al., 2000). This supports the plea for taking the perspective of primary prevention by offering a decent minimum of universal support and access to (affordable and good quality) early childhood services combined with appropriate targeted services.
67. **Child development.** Research on child development has clearly revealed a multi layered ecology of influences. Among others, the importance of responsive and stimulating parenting and quality childcare has been confirmed. This also brought to the fore the importance of the multidimensionality of the concept of child well-being.
68. Research on the impact on the well-being of young children is usually translated into specific developmental outcomes (health, cognitive or scholastic achievements i.e. verbal and mathematical skills). When a broader perspective is taken on the well-being of children, a new approach is needed in research into the impact of parental employment, early childhood services, etc. Rather than approaching (very) young children as 'objects' of research by developing 'objective' measurement instruments, research also needs to recognize children as social actors with their own experiences and 'meaning-making'. But listening to the voice of pre-verbal infants is very challenging indeed (i.e. Deven & Carrette, 2004).
69. **Gender issues.** Although we commonly refer to parenting, a major gender bias needs to be acknowledged as the vast majority of care is provided by mothers. In general, the risk needs to be recognised that much of the (Anglo-Saxon) parenting programmes and research often remains permeated with maternalistic assumptions. It is therefore suggested that the policies, programmes and analyses also be looked at from a gender perspective apart from class and ethnicity. It can for example be argued that the situation of (poor) single mothers can work as an indicator of the overall situation for women within a certain national context. Do state policies create different maneuvering rooms for different groups of mothers? Which discourses are dominant about the role of fathers? In general, it is felt relevant to apply 'friendliness' (women, children, etc.) to comparative analyses of systems of social provision such as UK Sure Start.
70. The analyses of effects of SSLPs on children could also be more gendered. Paying more attention to differences between **girls and boys** in early childhood can be relevant for the development of policies of prevention and support for teenagers. A related issue is the gendered nature of the workforce operating in early childhood services, pre- primary education, etc. and therefore considering the effects of the feminization of care and education.
71. Unlike parenting programmes that have historically targeted their services for mothers, such **programmes for fathers** are still in an infancy stage. Viewing the emerging nature of this field much of the work is being conducted on a local level (i.e. McBride & Lutz, 2004). The NESS has already analysed in the early years of the programme the involvement of fathers in SSLPs. They investigated how far men were being encouraged to take part in the programmes, what difference the involvement of fathers make to SSLPs, etc. The UK Sure Start provides a tremendous opportunity to examine which type of programmes are effective in altering the way fathers approach their parenting roles.

72. **Parenting programmes.** Research findings point to a number of positive *principles* for programmes of support for parents (i.e. Daly, 2006). It is suggested to discuss the UK Sure Start programme against each of these principles:
- ◆ A non-judgmental and non-stigmatising orientation
  - ◆ A bottom-up approach
  - ◆ Multi-focused and flexible services
  - ◆ Integrated, community based services
  - ◆ Inclusive of the experience of minority and ethnic groups
73. **Political momentum.** In previous years, an impressive record of achievement can be looked at in terms of budgets, programmes and research data. At the same time, much work remains in progress and needs proper time frames enabling all actors to further deliver the goods. Till now, the focus was mostly on short-term effects as it was too early to consider longer-term effects and outcomes. Moreover, as new challenges and aspirations have been added to the (political) agenda it is necessary that medium-term financial sustainability be provided.
74. Here too there is an obvious need for comprehensive, consistent and continued policies. Can the UK political and administrative authorities keep up the commitment and investments which have carried the valuable Sure Start initiative till now?

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DfES	Department of Education and Skills
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NESS	National Evaluation Sure Start
SSLP	Sure Start Local Programme
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

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## APPENDIX

## UK Sure Start

**Table 1.** Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) Expenditure, by budget year (England, 1999- 2006)

Year	SSLPs outturn (in £ million)	% increase compared to year of reference (100%)
1999-2000	5,2	
2000-2001	52,0	
<b>2001-2002</b>	<b>126,2</b>	<b>100</b>
2002-2003	205,6	162,9
2003-2004	359,4	284,8
2004-2005	562,6	445,8
2005-2006*	521,8	413,5

Source: UK Department for Education and Skills (A. Wilsdon, personal communication)

\* *estimated* outturn figure

**Table 2.** Number of Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) and of Children's Centres (CC) that have opened, by calendar year (England, 1999- 2006)

Year	No of SSLPs approved	No of CCs designated
1999	22	0
2000	102	0
2001	116	0
2002	161	0
2003	123	59
2004	0	131
2005	0	255
2006**	0	391
Totals	524	836

Source: UK Department for Education and Skills (A. Wilsdon, personal communication)

\*\* as at end March 2006

There is not a direct one to one read across from SSLPs to children's centres. Some SSLPs are developing into 2 or 3 children's centres (as part of this their existing catchment area is being extended).

**Table 3.** Number of Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) and of Children's Centres, by region (England, 2006)

ENGLAND By region	No. of SSLPs	No. of Children's Centres*
East	24	55
East Midlands	44	55
London	96	139
North East	62	92
North West	108	145
South East	32	70
South West	31	78
West Midlands	59	94
Yorkshire & Humberside	68	108
Totals	524	836

Source: UK Department for Education and Skills (A. Wilsdon, personal communication)

\* **designated** by 31th March 2006 (figures include some SSLPs that have now become children's centres).