Sure Start from the Beginning

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How it all started: key features of a new government

• New Labour
• New relationship between No 10 and 11
• New ways of making policy: Modernizing Govt
• New ways of allocating resources:
  – the Comprehensive spending reviews (CSRs)
  – Public Service Agreements
• New Labour and children
1998: The CSR on children under 8

Key findings:

• Poverty is bad for children, especially experience of poverty in the early years
• Most public expenditure on over 4s, once children are in school
• Several departments involved in services for under 5s, but no overall strategy
• Wide differences of quantity and quality of early years services across the country
• The right kind of services could help narrow the gap between poor children and the rest
Sure Start is born

• Announced in Parliament, July 1998
• Initial plan of 250 local programmes; allocation of £450 million over 3 years, each local programme to reach between 400 and 800 under fours
• PSA set the overall aims and objectives but local freedom to design local programme to meet PSA targets
• Overall aim, improve life chances of children in poverty and narrow the gap
• Tight loose design consistent with Mod. Agenda:
  – User not provider led
  – Flexible, responsive services sensitive to local needs
  – Joined up across different agencies and professions
  – Focus on outcomes not inputs
  – Evidence based?
    • Yes, in terms of imp of early years,
    • no in terms of actual design
Innovative Governance

At the centre

• cross departments: DfEE, Health, and HMT
• Cabinet level minister David Blunkett, SoS for Education, day to day control, Tessa Jowell, Minister for Public Health
• Steering group from 6 departments
• Personal accountability through head of the Unit

At local level

• Lead body to organise the plan
• Acct body to hold the money
• Partnership board including all key agencies, voluntary sector and local parents
• Small area with no clear administrative borders
What was a Sure Start Local Programme?

• Required set of core services,
  – Outreach and home visiting
  – Support for parents and carers
  – Play and childcare
  – Health advice
  – Support for children with special needs

• supplemented by whatever local Board thought necessary to achieve goals and PSA targets
An evolving policy

• 2002 – CSR doubles Sure Start from 250 to 500 local programmes
• 2004 - Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children, a ten year childcare strategy
  – Commitment to Sure Start for everyone, everywhere, 3,500 Sure Start children’s centres
  – Main control of the policy moved to Local Government, Early Years funding kept ring fenced at LA level, Sure Start rolled into wider early years and childcare funding, consistent with Every Child Matters
• 2011 – Early Years LA Grant becomes Early Intervention Grant
• 2013 – Ring fence for early years services completely removed, funding rolled into Local Government settlement
## Did Sure Start work?
NESS four impact studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2012</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Some early promising child and parent results for non teen mothers</td>
<td>Improved child and parent results, no differences in sub groups</td>
<td>Continued improvement in parent results Some small improvements in child health</td>
<td>Continued improvement in parent results: HLE, home chaos, life satisfaction No child cognitive or social differences</td>
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Child results may be later to emerge, or possible impact on younger sibs?
Did Sure Start Children’s Centres work? Evaluation of CCs in England

• Greater impact on outcomes for families and mothers; fewer effects for child outcomes

• Service use and characteristics of CC predicted better outcomes.

• Indirect effect of reducing child externalising behaviour via improvements in the home learning environment

• Children’s centres targeting their high need families for specialised services

• Children’s centre use helps to reduce but does not eliminate influence of disadvantage.

• CCs are especially important for families in poverty

• CCs experiencing cuts showed no improvement.
Where are we now?

• Drastic funding cuts in early years services overall, and particularly in Children’s Centres
  – Between 2009/10 and 2013/14, Sure Start cut in funding 41% (Stewart and Obolenskaya)
  – By 2017, 16 LAs closed half or more their centres; 6 LAs closed more than 70% of centres (Smith et al)
  – Many centres merged, and many open centres open with limited services during restricted hours (hollowing out)

• Change in service design and key principles
  – Reduction in open access services
  – Increase in targeted, and/or referrals only services
  – Fewer centres required longer distances for users to travel to centres; neighbourhood base increasingly lost
What have we learned?

It takes time....

• For services to get established even when money is plentiful
• For evidence from early evaluation to feed back into practice
• To build integrated working at local level
• For measurable impact to emerge
• Govt policy can make a difference, for good or ill
References

• Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project (Sylva et al, 2010)

• Providing a Sure Start: How Government discovered early childhood (Eisenstadt, 2011)

• Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England (Sammons et al, 2015)

• Parents, Poverty and the State (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019, forthcoming)