



Research report

**IMPACT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE ON POLICY:
SURE START CASE STUDY**

Report to Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

Steve Johnson

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Summary

This report synthesises the evidence regarding the impact of social science on the development and implementation of the UK Government's Sure Start initiative, which was established in 1999 to focus on providing integrated early years services primarily targeted on disadvantaged groups. The research was undertaken by Dr Steve Johnson, who has led a number of studies of the impact of research on policy, for ESRC and other organisations. Sure Start was selected as a focus for study because it has been perceived widely – not least by one of its key architects, Norman Glass – as an excellent example of evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policy.

The study involved bringing together existing material that has described and analysed the contribution made by social research both to the decision to embark on a major initiative to address the disadvantages suffered by some groups of children in England at the early years stage, and to the detailed decisions made about the implementation of the Sure Start programme. The research drew on the work of distinguished researchers such as Norman Glass, Edward Melhuish, Jane Lewis and John Bynner, among many others.

A retrospective ('tracking back') approach was employed in order to identify the key research findings and publications that impacted demonstratively on key decisions made about Sure Start. The synthesis takes into account the wider range of factors - including political imperatives and the pressures of public opinion - that also influenced decision-making processes about Sure Start. The review sought to identify the key factors that facilitated and constrained the impact of social research on policy. The role played by ESRC in supporting the research that underpinned Sure Start was also examined.

In order to more fully understand the role of social research and to place the study in its historical perspective, a small number of interviews were undertaken with key individuals who have been involved in the management or delivery of Sure Start programme and/or as researchers or evaluators. Key informants were asked to reflect on the history of the initiative and to pinpoint the research findings and publications that had, in retrospect, the most significant impact on Sure Start.

It is clear from this study that social research played a significant role in the establishment of Sure Start, not least through the workings of a cross-departmental review to which a number of leading researchers contributed. The willingness of such researchers to participate in dialogue with policy-makers and interest groups is one of the key factors that ensured the impact of research in this case.

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project both made important contributions to the subsequent development of Sure Start, mediated in many cases by political and other considerations. Several informants acknowledged the indirect but important contribution made by ESRC, notably in supporting the birth cohort studies.

This piece of work adds to a growing body of evidence that will help researchers and policy-makers to understand the role played by social research, and to that end, the report and the associated short case study are written in such a way as to highlight key points and lessons that may be learnt for the future.

1. Sure Start: a brief history

A number of authors have written about the development and implementation of Sure Start, not least the National Evaluation of Sure Start team¹ and the first national director of Sure Start Naomi Eisenstadt². In addition, a number of official publications and records have documented the history of the initiative and discussed the key policy and operational decisions that were taken³. This section highlights decisions that are relevant to understanding the role played in the process by social research. These were:

- The initial decision to establish Sure Start
- The decision to focus on disadvantaged areas
- Decisions regarding the nature and range of services to be provided
- The balance between central direction and community engagement
- The evaluation process
- The speed of early roll-out
- The decision to establish children's centres nationwide and to convert existing Sure Start centres into children's centres

1.1 Establishing Sure Start – the initial decision

Professor Edward Melhuish and his colleagues in the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) team have described in some detail the process through which the initial decision was made in 1998 to establish Sure Start, with a first-hand account being available from Norman Glass⁴, one of the central figures in the process that led up to the establishment of Sure Start. The issue has been revisited through, for example, the discussions of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee and most recently in a book written by Naomi Eisenstadt, the first national director of Sure Start⁵.

Interviews conducted for this project explored the recollections of some of the key actors and – while there are some nuances of interpretation – there is an overwhelming view that social research and social researchers played a key role in the decision to establish Sure Start, and also influenced decisions about precisely how the concept should be operationalised and rolled out. The role of social research is explored in more detail in section 3 of this report; some important elements of the policy background to Sure Start are as follows⁶:

- Following the election of the Labour Government in 1997, Gordon Brown became Chancellor of the Exchequer and took the decision to give the Bank of England operational independence from the Treasury.

¹ Melhuish and Hall (2007)

² Eisenstadt (2011): The Appendix provides a useful chronology of Sure Start

³ National Audit Office (2009), House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010)

⁴ Glass (1999)

⁵ See also Waldfogel (2010, pp.82-4) for a useful brief overview

⁶ This section draws heavily on Melhuish and Hall (2007)

- This freed up resources in the Treasury to enable Mr Brown to pursue a number of issues that he felt strongly about, including child poverty and social exclusion. He asked one of his senior economists, Norman Glass, to explore potential policy options in this area.
- Linked to the notion of ‘joined up’ services, a cross-departmental review was established under the auspices of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), tasked with focusing on services for young children.
- Among other activities, a number of seminars were held with researchers and other expert groups to discuss the available evidence and its implications. This process is described in more detail in section 3.
- The conclusions of the review highlighted the importance of the earliest years in life in terms of the objective of breaking inter-generational cycles of social exclusion, and the need to ensure that services were more coordinated and less patchy than was the case at the time.
- It was also concluded that services should be two-generational (involving parents and children), non-stigmatising, multifaceted, persistent over time, locally-driven and culturally appropriate.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in July 1998 the intention to establish a series of Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) with funding of £542 million over 3 years, with different funding and organisational arrangements for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1.2 Operationalising the concept

In England it was decided that there would be 250 local programmes up and running by 2001-2, supporting about 187,000 children. Each programme would have a ring-fenced budget – approximately equivalent to £1,250 per child – with the total level of funding to fall after the third year of operations. Programmes would be funded by central government for 10 years. The programmes were to be targeted at the 20 per cent most deprived areas; Melhuish and colleagues calculated that this would account for 51 per cent of all poor children (defined as living in households with an income of 60 per cent or less than the national median). Full details are presented in Melhuish and Hall (2007) and Eisenstadt (2011, Chapter 3).

An important in principle decision that was made during the early stages of the establishment of Sure Start was to build a considerable degree of local autonomy and community influence over the nature of services to be delivered, albeit within broad central government guidance regarding key principles and the core services to be provided. This is an issue over which there was (and is) some debate regarding the role of research evidence as opposed to other influences on decision-making. We review this in more detail in Section 3.

1.3 Initial operation and roll-out

Melhuish and Hall (2007) note that the network of SSLPs was slow to become established, a consequence – they argue – of the ‘overwhelming’ speed at which

funding was made available. Furthermore, following the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review, it was decided to double the number of planned programme to 500 by 2004, with a more than doubling of total expenditure on Sure Start. Again, this was a decision that some argue was not supported by the research evidence – see sections 3.3 and 3.4 below.

In 2001, the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was commissioned to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the programme, a challenging task due to the diversity of SSLPs, among other factors⁷. According to Melhuish and Hall:

... there were not several hundred programme delivering one well-defined intervention, but several hundred unique and multi-faceted interventions operating in different places (p.16)

NESS was a substantial longitudinal research exercise involving in-depth study of the development of children within 150 of the 260 SSLPs, analysis of a wide range of statistical and administrative data at local level, surveys of and interviews with Sure Start managers, staff and parents and a large-scale survey of thousands of households in Sure Start and non Sure Start areas. To date, the NESS team has produced over 40 reports, as well as a wide range of peer-reviewed publications, presentations and other material.⁸

1.4 The introduction of Children's Centres

Early evidence from NESS, published in 2005, was beginning to suggest that SSLPs were not having the impact that had been hoped for. At the same time, findings were emerging from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project that indicated that integrated children's centres were particularly beneficial to children's development. On the basis of these findings, the then Minister responsible for Sure Start announced in 2005 that SSLPs would become Sure Start Children's Centres and would be transferred to local authority control. We discuss the research evidence underpinning this move and the other factors influencing the Minister's decision in section 3.6.

⁷ Eisenstadt (2011, Chapter 5) presents a detailed and compelling analysis of the process of establishing the evaluation project and commissioning the evaluation team.

⁸ See www.ness.bbk.ac.uk for more information

2. Sources and methods

2.1 Documentary sources

Several documents make reference to the impact of social research on the development and implementation of the Sure Start initiative, notably a 1999 article by Norman Glass⁹ and Edward Melhuish's paper for the British Educational Research Association in 2007¹⁰. Papers discussed at a 1998 seminar linked to the Cross-Departmental Review¹¹ also make reference to the research underpinnings of what was to become Sure Start, as do the proceedings of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee¹², for example.

More recently, studies for ESRC of the evolution of child poverty policy and the impact of the Millennium Cohort Study have collected and analysed information about Sure Start, representing as it does one of the flagship programmes of the 1997-2010 Labour Government in relation to child poverty and social mobility. Jane Lewis of the London School of Economics recently published a useful paper charting and analysing the history of Sure Start¹³. Finally, Naomi Eisenstadt, the first director of Sure Start, has written a book about her experiences and views.¹⁴

Given the availability of such a rich source of documentary evidence, it was not appropriate to undertake any significant new data collection. Rather the task was primarily to bring together and synthesise the available evidence and place it in the context of developments in our understanding of the research-policy interface. It was also necessary to interpret the significance of social research in the light of policy developments since the publication of the documents referred to above.

In particular, the review adopted a 'tracking back' approach to the analysis of the impact of social science on Sure Start¹⁵, commencing with an understanding of the current operation of the initiative and tracing back to assess the role of social science at different stages of the programme's history. This approach was adopted successfully for a study for ESRC of the *Pathways to Work* initiative¹⁶.

While analysis and (re)interpretation of key policy and research documents formed the core of this study, it was recognised that there was value in conducting a small number of interviews with key individuals involved in the development and implementation of Sure Start. There are two main justifications for this:

- It provided key individuals with the opportunity to reflect on the role played by research, in the light of developments over time
- Consultation with key individuals facilitated exploration of informal links between researchers, policy-makers and other influential bodies such as pressure groups and think tanks, which are not always evident from documentary sources

⁹ Glass (1999)

¹⁰ Melhuish (2007)

¹¹ HM Treasury (1998)

¹² House of Commons (2010)

¹³ Lewis (2011)

¹⁴ Eisenstadt (2011)

¹⁵ Johnson and Antill (2011)

¹⁶ Consulting Inplace (2010)

2.2 Policy and research review

This main phase of the study entailed bringing together all of the available documentary evidence to develop an understanding of the development and implementation of the Sure Start policy initiative and the role played by social research at each stage of its history. The policy was then traced through the Cross-Departmental Review and associated activities, at each point identifying key decision points and highlighting cases where social research appears to have been considered in the decision-making process. Key operational changes to Sure Start – for example arising from evaluation findings – were tracked, with a specific focus on the relative impact of research findings and other factors in relation to final decisions made.

The review focused on identifying conceptual impacts (research that has influenced the underlying thinking of policy-makers regarding the role of early years development in social inclusion/mobility, for example) and instrumental impacts (research that has led to identifiable changes in policy operation, such as the location of Sure Start centres or specific services provided). In addition the review examined, as far as feasible, the **process** through which research appears to have influenced policy (e.g. how closely does the process approximate to a ‘linear’ model and what other factors are at play, such as media pressure).

The following documents were examined:

- The Cross-Departmental Review of Provision for Young Children, and associated documents such as reports of workshops associated with the Review
- Relevant Parliamentary documentation including the proceedings of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee discussions of Sure Start
- Key documents produced by the National Evaluation of Sure Start
- Academic and other publications examining the interaction between research and policy in relation to Sure Start

2.3 Key informant interviews

While this was primarily a desk-based review, it was felt to be useful to conduct a small number of consultations with a targeted group of individuals who are in a position to provide additional insight into the findings of the desk review and/or clarify or re-visit their own thoughts on the role of social research in the development and implementation of Sure Start.

A total of eight interviews were undertaken with the aid of a relatively loose topic guide designed to elicit respondents’ views on the nature and extent of research influence on strategic and operational decision-making. Interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity for the interviewees and non-attribution of quotes or views expressed. Respondents were involved at various stages of the policy and implementation process, including researchers, policy-makers and practitioners.

3. Sure Start as evidence-based policy: analysis

3.1 Introduction

The starting point for this analysis is the notion, expressed most strongly by Norman Glass, that Sure Start is an excellent example of a policy that was developed largely on the basis of research evidence:

*The Sure Start programme represents a new way of doing things both in the development of the policy and in its delivery. It is an attempt to put into practice 'joined-up thinking' but it is also an **outstanding example of evidence-based policy** and open, consultative government (1999, p.264, our emphasis)*

This section of the report dissects in some detail the role played by research at each stage of the policy development and implementation process described in section 1. We identify other factors in addition to research evidence that played a role in key decisions regarding Sure Start and we consider the process through which research findings were communicated and shared with policy-makers and practitioners. We highlight the key factors that appear to have facilitated research impact as well as those that inhibited or mediated the role of research evidence. We consider indirect as well as direct impacts of research, including the role of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as a key funder of social research. In section 4, we offer our overall assessment of the lessons learned from Sure Start and present some conclusions and recommendations regarding the most effective means through which social research can maximise its impact on the policy-making process.

3.2 The contribution of social research to the cross-departmental review

Central to the cross-cutting review of services for young children was a series of seminars, organised and chaired by Norman Glass, which brought together leading researchers and other experts to discuss the implications of existing research findings and the implications of studies of the effectiveness of different forms of intervention in the UK and in other countries. Participants included academic researchers and representatives from a range of interest groups such as the National Children's Bureau, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, YoungMinds and local authority providers of children's services (see Table 3.1 for a list of academic presenters and participants).

It is clear from a review of the published material¹⁷ and from discussions with a number of key informants, that the reviews of research evidence and effectiveness of interventions were highly influential in the decision to establish the Sure Start programme. Significant contributions were made by John Bynner (then of the Social Statistics Research Unit, City University), Marjorie Smith and colleagues (Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education), Sue Richards (School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham), Kay Tisdall (Centre for the Child and Society, University of Glasgow), Jane Tunstall (Department of Social Policy and Social Science, Royal

¹⁷ HM Treasury (1998)

Holloway) and Mary Jane Drummond (School of Education, University of Cambridge).

Table 3.1: Cross-departmental review seminars - academic presenters and participants

Name	Institution
PRESENTERS/DISCUSSANTS	
John Bynner	Social Statistics Research Unit
Christine Oliver	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Marjorie Smith	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Sandy Barker	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Sue Richards	School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham
E. Kay M. Tisdall	Centre for Children and Society, University of Glasgow
Jane Tunstill	Social Policy and Social Science, Royal Holloway
Mary Jane Drummond	School of Education, University of Cambridge
Lynne Murray	Psychology Department, University of Reading
Peter J. Cooper	Psychology Department, University of Reading
OTHERS CONSULTED DURING REVIEW	
Bob Coles	University of York
Daniel Dorling	University of Bristol
Alan Dyson	University of Newcastle
Jean Golding	University of Bristol
Bob Holman	University of Glasgow
Gill Jones	University of Cambridge
Kathleen Kiernan	London School of Economics
Hilary Land	University of Bristol
Catherine Law	University of Southampton
Stephen Machin	University College London
Peter Moss	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Tim Newburn	Goldsmiths College
Chris Oliver	Thomas Coram Research Unit
Tess Ridge	University of Bath
Ceridwen Roberts	Family Policy Studies Centre
Ian Roberts	Institute of Children's Health
Carole Robinson	Norah Fry Research Centre
Wendy Rose	University of Leicester
Ian Sinclair	University of York
Theresa Smith	University of Oxford
Mike Stein	University of York
June Thoburn	University of East Anglia
Jonathan Thomas	University College London
Carolyn Webster-Stratton	Oxford University

Source: HM Treasury (1998)

The conclusions set out by Oliver, Smith and Barker (1998) - having reviewed a considerable volume of evidence on the effectiveness of early interventions - are broadly consistent with the messages contained in early policy announcements and guidance in relation to Sure Start, for example:

'Projects are more likely to be successful if they promote the involvement of local people in their planning and implementation' (p.30)

'Initiatives which are targeted geographically carry the risk of stigmatising communities, but also provides a useful mechanism for reducing poverty in areas with high levels of deprivation ... An ethos of community participation together with the availability of a range of interventions can operate as protective factors' (p.33)

Similarly, Bynner's conclusions¹⁸ resonate strongly with subsequent policy statements, recognising the positive results attained in particular by US initiatives such as the Perry Pre-School Programme and Head Start, and also suggesting the need for a balance between area-based policies, universal provision and child-based targeting:

'Central to these cycles [of child development] is the role of the family, both as the creator of conditions for later maladjustment, and as the means by which it can be resisted ... The possibility of reversing such processes with intervention or change of family circumstances is well demonstrated in a range of successful pre-school projects' (p.7)

'Economies are gained through targeting geographically where there are high levels of vulnerability ... [but] ... many families do not need the targeted provision in high risk areas and many families outside the high risk areas need it a lot. Alongside area-based targeting, universal family and child-based targeting is always going to be necessary'. (p.7)

Much of the evidence that Bynner presents regarding the relationship between early years and subsequent outcomes is based on analysis of 1958 and 1970 Birth Cohort Survey data. These data sets are partly supported through ESRC funding, as has been the work of a number of researchers who have analysed cohort survey data, for example Paul Gregg and Stephen Machin, to whom Bynner refers in his paper.

Many of the papers presented (by academics and others) at the seminars are synthesis or review papers and, as such, they are underpinned by the work of many researchers who were not directly involved in the seminars. Authors cited in these papers include, among many others:

- Jonathan Bradshaw
- Nick Frost
- Peter Moss
- Michael Rutter
- Kathy Sylva
- Jay Belsky
- Paul Gregg
- Stephen Machin
- Ann Oakley
- Iram Siraj-Blatchford

¹⁸ Bynner, J. (1998)

- Mark Wadsworth
- David Farrington

It is therefore appropriate to conclude that, in addition to those who directly participated in the review, the work of a large number of social researchers contributed to the discussions that led to a fundamental policy decisions being made to establish and invest resources in a new network of programme to address early years issues in a manner consistent with the findings of a considerable body of social research.

Discussions with key informants suggest that a number of factors came together to ensure that the deliberations of the academics and other experts were taken seriously by key decision-makers, notably Ministers:

- The newly-elected Labour Government committed itself explicitly to pursuing 'evidence-based' policy-making, along with other approaches, notably 'joined-up thinking' and developing services that are responsive to the needs of users rather than providers.
- The personality, enthusiasm and professionalism of Norman Glass was important in bringing together leading researchers, thinkers, practitioners and interest groups and encouraging them to share and debate ideas.
- The availability of research findings that were widely recognised as being of extremely high quality, utilising 'gold standard' techniques such as Randomised Control Trials in the case of evaluations of early years initiatives in the US, and birth cohort studies in the case of UK studies of life courses.
- The lead Minister, Tessa Jowell, was sufficiently interested in the evidence to attend one of the seminars

The outcome was therefore the establishment of a policy based primarily on the findings of research studies. As one key informant pointed out, there was no strong pressure from the media or 'public opinion' to establish Sure Start and indeed the benefits of the initiative were likely to be felt well beyond the lifetime of a one parliament. This, together with the congruence between research findings and subsequent policy statements provides strong evidence to support the key, direct and indirect, role of social science in the establishment of one of the flagship policy initiatives of the 1997-2010 Labour Government.

A range of views exist as to the role played by research in subsequent decisions in relation to the operation, expansion and ultimately the fundamental re-shaping of the Sure Start initiative, discussed below.

3.3 Establishing the first programmes: central guidance versus local autonomy

The paper for the Cross-Departmental Review by Oliver, Smith and Barker of the effectiveness of early years interventions concluded that:

'... the imposition of rigid blueprints should be avoided and is contrary to a "bottom up" rather than "top down" approach. Interventions that are successful appear to be flexible to local needs ...' (p35)

On the other hand, the findings from robust evaluations of the US initiatives that were so influential in providing the evidence to support investment in Sure Start (for example demonstrating the potential for future cost savings) suggest the need for high-quality provision that is tightly specified (Melhuish and Hall, 2007). In contrast, Melhuish and Hall suggest that the community focus of Sure Start was driven primarily by New Labour's broader principles (including 'Modernising Government') and less strongly influenced by the evidence. Eisenstadt (2011: 29-31) similarly argues that the design of Sure Start partly reflected the available research evidence, but was also influenced by the views of interest groups and the commitment of leading New Labour politicians to localised 'bottom-up' approaches. Hence:

'Sure Start became a heady mix of politics, policy and evidence.'
(Eisenstadt, 2011: 30)

Indeed one key informant suggests that the 'evidence' underpinning the community focus of the first phase of Sure Start consisted mainly of submissions from local groups, the majority of which was not based on rigorous research and did not constitute evidence in the accepted sense of the word. In his oral evidence to the Children, Schools and Families Committee in 2009, Professor Edward Melhuish stated:

'... communities that had a Sure Start programme could decide more or less what to put into place ... That was exactly the opposite of what the evidence was telling us, which was that very tightly defined programmes produced good results. In that sense, while there was some evidence that inspired the idea that early intervention works, the way that Sure Start was initially put in place did not pay too much attention to the detail of that evidence' (Ev 14, 2 November 2009)

It might therefore be argued that political principles to some extent mediated the process of evidence-based policy-making by (implicitly) giving more weight to one set of 'evidence' that was consistent with those principles over arguably more robust evidence that suggested a more tightly-controlled centralised approach that would have been at odds with the 'Modernising Government' philosophy. This decision had important implications for the evaluation of Sure Start, as we discuss below.

3.4 The first phase of expansion

Melhuish and Hall (2007) suggest that the decision made in 2000 to double the number of Sure Start programmes (and the associated funding) was not based on evidence. Indeed the national evaluation (see 3.5 below) had yet to produce any findings and the announcement followed a period during which new programmes were being established at a slow rate. At the time some people, including Norman Glass and Naomi Eisenstadt, advised against such a rapid expansion and Melhuish and Hall noted that this move had significant implications for the national evaluation. One key informant suggested that this expansion was primarily driven by

politicians' desire to have 'facts on the ground' which would leave a legacy. Another was more explicit in stating that the 'rapid expansion' decision was a political one.

3.5 The national evaluation: methodological issues

There was widespread agreement about the need for comprehensive, robust evaluation of Sure Start, and a team led by John Bynner was commissioned to undertake a scoping study which would recommend the approach to be adopted for a national evaluation. The project team (Table 3.2) comprised many of the leading researchers in the early years field, several of whom had contributed (directly or indirectly) to the cross-departmental review

Table 3.2: Sure Start Evaluation Development Project: team members and consultants

Name	Institution
PROJECT TEAM	
John Bynner	Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education
Elsa Ferri	Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education
Ian Plewis	Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education
Yvonne Kelly	International Centre for Health and Society, UCL
Michael Marmot	International Centre for Health and Society, UCL
Kevin Pickering	National Centre for Social Research
Teresa Smith	Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford
George Smith	Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford
CONSULTANTS	
Lorraine Dearden	Institute for Fiscal Studies
John van Reenen	Institute for Fiscal Studies
Kathy Sylva	Educational Studies, University of Oxford
Jane Waldfogel	Social Work, Columbia University
Jeanne Brooks-Gunn	Child Development and Education, Columbia University

Source: Sure Start Evaluation Development Project, 1999

The report of the Evaluation Development Project (Bynner et al, 1999) presented a number of options for the national evaluation. It is interesting to note that the use of randomised control trials (RCT), as was the case in some of the US studies that heavily influenced the decision to implement Sure Start, was not recommended by the study. This appears from the report to be due to a combination of practical concerns (e.g. how to allocate children in an area between treatments and control groups) and concerns about the political impact of deciding that some localities would not be designated as Sure Start areas for the purposes of the evaluation. Thus, despite support being expressed for an RCT approach from eminent researchers, notably Michael Rutter, this was rejected in favour of a methodology involving comparison groups drawn from the Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS) which was widely regarded as robust, but did not reach the 'gold standard' of RCT.

A second related evaluation issue that has been mentioned previously relates to the decision to grant considerable autonomy to local Sure Start groups to decide how to organise and deliver services, within broad guidelines. This suggests that an important aspect of the evaluation should be to establish 'what works and why?' at the level of the individual Sure Start programme, implying the need for local contextual research and in-depth work with programmes. It also places an important

onus on the evaluation to feed back findings in a timely manner to ensure that research findings lead to changes in practice. Again this is in contrast to the evaluations of the main US initiatives, which adopted a more ‘scientific’ detached approach to evaluation, which took place over a long period of time (up to 20 years in the case of the Perry Pre-School project in Michigan)¹⁹.

Finally, and following on from the above comment, the frequency of reporting back of evaluation findings was an important factor in deciding on the shape of the national evaluation.²⁰ The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) team, which ultimately won the contract, committed to producing and publishing evaluation findings at relatively frequent intervals, in line with the need for a formative as well as summative approach to the evaluation process. This proved to be important in relation to the key decision, taken in 2005 to transform Sure Start Local Programmes into Children’s Centres. This is discussed below.

3.6 The transition to children’s centres: the roles of NESS and EPPE

One of the most significant policy decisions in relation to Sure Start took place in 2005 when it was announced that the then Government wished to establish a national network of Children’s Centres that would provide integrated services and have a broader focus than the SSLPs, in particular incorporating childcare services and support for lone parents (and other parents) to find work, which was by then seen as the primary route out of poverty. The existing network of SSLPs would become Sure Start Children’s Centres, albeit with higher levels of funding (in the short term) than newly-established centres.²¹ This led Norman Glass (2005) to declare that ‘... *the government’s much-lauded Sure Start programme has been abolished*’

A key question from the point of view of this project is to what extent this fundamental policy decision resulted from consideration of the research evidence. Our literature review and discussions with some of the key players suggest that three main factors came together to influence this decision, two related to research findings and the third less so:

- The first round of NESS findings
- The EPPE research programme
- Political considerations

3.6.1 NESS findings

The first findings from the national evaluation were published in 2005.²² While the results were mixed, the key headline finding was that SSLPs did not appear to be

¹⁹ See in particular Bronfenbrenner (1974), which summarises the key findings of the US evaluations. Jane Waldfogel presented an overview of the US findings at one of the cross-departmental review seminars.

²⁰ See Eisenstadt (2011, Chapter 5) for a thorough discussion of the process of commissioning the evaluation and the reasons for the panel’s decision to contract with the NESS team.

²¹ Lewis (2011) provides a useful overview of the development of children’s centres and their relationship with SSLPs

²² National Evaluation of Sure Start (2005)

having the impact that had been hoped for. While some positive developments were noted, considerable attention was focused on findings that suggested that Sure Start was not having the expected impact on the development of children in the most disadvantaged groups, for example those with teenage mothers.

These findings raised the possibility that Sure Start was not, in many areas, reaching those families most in need, who may indeed have been receiving fewer services than they would have had if living in other areas. The evaluation also pinpointed considerable differences between Sure Start areas in terms of their effectiveness.

Interestingly, later evaluation findings published in 2008²³ suggest broadly positive impacts for all target population groups in Sure Start areas. These results, however, emerged long after the decision had been taken to roll out children's centres.

3.6.2 EPPE

At around the same time as the initial NESS results, the findings from a major research initiative supported from 1996 onwards by the then Department of Education and Employment were beginning to be disseminated. Among other things, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project²⁴ indicated that integrated children's centres were particularly beneficial to children's development.

While not directly linked to the Sure Start initiative, EPPE was important to its development and has been recognised as a good example of research influencing policy and practice. EPPE is a longitudinal study of the effects of pre-school and primary school on the academic and social development of more than 3,000 children in England and is described by Sylva *et al* (2007) as '*... one of the first in the UK to work interactively with Government partners in the shaping of both "research" and "policy" outputs*' (155).

Key informants interviewed for this project acknowledged the importance of EPPE in both providing the evidence base to support the transformation of SSLPs into integrated centres and in providing robust evidence on 'what works' to support practitioners on the ground.

A number of policy documents and statements have also highlighted the policy impact generated by EPPE (Sylva *et al*, 2007, 164; Taggart *et al*, 2008, 12-13). In the context of Sure Start, the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee 2010 report²⁵ (discussed in more detail below) makes several references to EPPE findings and concludes that '*(it) is essential that practice in Children's Centres reflects the lessons of the EPPE research ...*' (para. 6).

3.6.3 Political factors

While the results of these two research projects – the first one one 'mixed' and the later one one broadly positive – provided considerable justification for the decision of the responsible Minister (Margaret Hodge), it has been acknowledged by

²³ National Evaluation of Sure Start (2008)

²⁴ Sylva, K. *et al* (2004). Note that Edward Melhuish, NESS Director, was also part of the EPPE team.

²⁵ House of Commons Children Schools and Families Committee (2010)

Melhuish and Hall (2007) and argued strongly by Lewis (2011) that political considerations also contributed. Increasing public concern regarding child safety following the tragic case of Victoria Climbié, subsequent enquiries and the publication of *Every Child Matters*²⁶ emphasised the importance of interagency collaboration and training, and the ‘safeguarding’ of children. This was all consistent with the concept of integrated children’s centres.

A further contextual policy issue was the increasing significance being accorded to the ‘employability’ agenda, including the notion that ‘work is the best route out of poverty’ for disadvantaged groups such as lone parents. The new children’s centres were required to work in partnership with Jobcentre Plus to provide advice and support on training and job search, as well as childcare services. This represented a significant departure from the focus of SSLPs on child development and family support, and led Norman Glass to suggest that Sure Start had been subject to ‘capture by the “employability” agenda’ (2005).

Professor Jane Lewis of the London School of Economics undertook a thorough and independent analysis of the shift from Sure Start to Children’s Centres, including a review of all of the relevant literature and interviews with ‘key policy actors’. She argues that, while it was portrayed at the time in terms of continuity, the transition in fact represented a radical change in approach. She suggests that:

‘The reasons for the shift to Children’s Centres related in part to changes in the government’s policy agenda in respect of the service offer made by SSLPs and of services for young children more generally, and in part to evidence of programme failure offered by the National Evaluation.’ (2011; 78)

The shifts in policy agenda to which Lewis refers include greater emphasis on childcare provision as opposed to support for children and families, linked to targets for child poverty and the employment for lone mothers. She also notes the *Every Child Matters* agenda, placing greater stress on prevention rather than educational achievement. Recognition that not all disadvantaged children lived in disadvantaged areas led, according to Lewis, to ‘the end of sure Start as an area-based programme’ (79), responding to increasing pressure for a universal service.

Finally, Lewis cites the findings of the first set of reports produced by the National Evaluation, which provided ‘strong evidence of programme failure’ (79) and provoked strong and broadly critical press reaction. Lewis recognises that the nature of Sure Start and the restrictions on methods that could be used (e.g. randomised control trials were ruled out) meant that it was unlikely that the evaluation could provide definitive findings. She quotes Sir Michael Rutter as stating that evidence-based policy was trumped by political pressure. Similarly Tunstall et al (2005) concluded that ‘(at) face value it may be argued that in this case national policy has evolved in advance of conclusive evaluation findings.’ (168)

3.7 The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee

In the 2009-2010 parliamentary session, the Children, Schools and Families Committee undertook an enquiry into the Children’s Centres, calling several

²⁶ Cm. 5860, 2003

witnesses and amassing a substantial body of written evidence. The Committee's report, published in March 2010, provides a very useful opportunity to review the development of the Sure Start initiative since 1997 and to assess the role played by social research and social researchers in that process.

The first point to note is that some of the key researchers who were involved at or near the beginning of the Sure Start 'journey' presented oral and written evidence to the Committee, demonstrating an element of continuity in the relationship between researchers and policy-makers. Most of the witnesses and the overwhelming majority of written evidence were, however, provided by interest groups such as Barnardo's and Action for Children, educational bodies, trade unions, local authorities or children's centres themselves. The only written evidence from academic institutions came from NESS, the Institute of Education (two submissions) and the Cass School of Education at the University of East London.

The second point is that the Committee refers throughout its deliberations to the 'evidence-based' nature of Sure Start and the Children's Centres. Indeed, the first three paragraphs of their report focus on this issue:

*The Sure Start programme as a whole is one of the most innovative and ambitious Government initiatives of the past two decades. We have heard almost no negative comment about its intentions and principles; **it has been solidly based on evidence** that the early years are when the greatest difference can be made to a child's life chances ...' (Conclusions and Recommendations, para. 1, our emphasis)*

*'For the programme to work to its full potential ... **services must be evidence-based** and practitioners highly-skilled.'* (Conclusions and Recommendations, para. 3, our emphasis)

Other references to research evidence in the Committee's report include:

- A summary of the cross-departmental review findings, particularly in relation to evaluations of a number of US projects
- A number of references to the EPPE project throughout the report, including a summary presented in paragraph 14
- Mention of the role played by 'disappointing early evaluations of the impact of the Sure Start Local programmes' (para. 15) in the decision to create and roll out children's centres
- A number of quotes from the evidence presented by Edward Melhuish, Director of NESS, Iram Siraj-Blatchford of EPPE and Teresa Smith of the team that is evaluating the Children's Centres.

It is clear from this report that this important committee of MPs took very seriously the findings and views of researchers and evaluators associated with Sure Start and subsequent developments. The report also draws heavily on evidence presented by key figures such as Naomi Eisenstadt (former national director of Sure Start), a number of pressure groups such as Action for Children, education and health bodies,

local authority representatives, Children's Centres themselves and, not least, the then Minister responsible for Sure Start, Dawn Primarolo.

It is difficult to provide a definitive assessment of the weight given to research evidence in the deliberations of the Committee, but the indications are that this particular group of MPs was keen to explore in some detail the evidence underpinning the Children's Centre programme and paid a considerable amount of attention to the evidence in compiling their final report.

The transcripts of the Committee's questioning of research witnesses²⁷ provide some interesting insights into the relationship between researchers and policy-makers, for example:

'We are at the very beginning of the journey of being able to demonstrate to you whether children's centres work and to what extent they work, but you're not going to be able to wait five years for that evidence' (Teresa Smith)

'You would think that someone would have a pretty good idea by now, without five more years of research ... I'm just feeling irritated. There is 10 years of experience and another five years of research ...' (Barry Sheerman MP)

'... you may get quick answers from the 10 centres that are nearest to you, but who knows if those centres are in any way representative ...? That is basically why we do research. You want soundly based answers that will hold water ...' (Teresa Smith)

'...what has been learned about being able to narrow the gap between more disadvantaged children...?' (Helen Southworth MP)

'I think that there has been some progress in narrowing the gap, but it's very, very difficult to assess.' (Iram Siraj-Blatchford)

The evidence of Naomi Eisenstadt also makes several references to research evidence, notably the work of NESS and of EPPE, in demonstrating that Sure Start programmes with a health lead tend to do better and that disadvantaged children do better in mixed environments, a strong argument for the children's centre approach. Eisenstadt emphasises the strong academic credibility of the NESS and EPPE work and the need to ensure the continuation of evaluation activity over a long period of time. Finally, she notes the need to build skills and capacity among Children's Centre staff to make the best use of the available evidence:

'We need to build the skills at local level, to be able to select the best evidence-based programmes that suit local parents ...'

²⁷ Professor Edward Melhuish, Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford and Teresa Smith, 2 November 1999

Finally, the written evidence provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the oral evidence of the then Minister (Dawn Primarolo) and the then Director of the Early Years Group at DCSF (Ann Gross) makes extensive reference to the research evidence, notably the more recent findings from NESS and a market research survey that presented a broadly positive picture of the impact of Children's Centres. The Minister did, however, demonstrate the influence of political concepts by noting that:

'The children's centre programme is based on a universal system – progressive universalism – that says that every child benefits but some children need more resources directed at them than others do' (Q371)

While the impact of the Committee's findings and recommendations may have been overtaken by the election of a new Government in May 2010, two months after the publication of their report, the proceedings provide valuable evidence that social research continues to play an important role in the evolution of this key policy initiative. Section 4 of this report considers some of the factors that have promoted such a degree of research impact and also the inhibiting and mediating factors that have affected the role of research over the 14 years of the development and implementation of Sure Start.

4. The impact of research on Sure Start: assessment

4.1 Factors influencing research impact

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that **social research played a very important role in the decision to establish the Sure Start programme in 1998**. Evidence from high-quality robust evaluations of a number of US initiatives and findings from analysis of birth cohort study data, along with a range of smaller-scale and qualitative studies were influential in convincing the relatively newly-elected Labour Government that investment in early years provision would benefit society and the economy by reducing the risk of social exclusion among young children in disadvantaged groups and areas.

What is particularly distinctive about the initial period of discussion about early years policies was the deliberate and systematic manner in which the government sought to bring together the research findings and debate their implications for public policy. Norman Glass, a key figure in this process, actively sought out experts (academic and otherwise), commissioned review papers and convened a series of seminars involving these experts along with government officials and in one case the Minister. Key informants interviewed for this study were unanimous in pointing out that Mr Glass's energy and enthusiasm played a central role in the acknowledged success of the cross-departmental review process.

A further key success factor is clearly the willingness of academic researchers to get involved in such an exercise and to put together papers that were designed primarily for a policy rather than a research audience. Academics were asked to share platforms with pressure group representatives and practitioners as well as policy-makers and this appears to have provided the foundation for a series of well-received papers that drew together the leading research at the time. It also led to fruitful debate and discussion, focusing on practical and policy outcomes.

We have also noted that, while the initial establishment of Sure Start was undoubtedly influenced heavily by research findings, there is less unanimity about the extent to which subsequent policy and operational decisions were evidence-based. Some key informants for this study suggested that the decision to emphasise community engagement and encourage a wide range of delivery models at local level was driven more by a political commitment to the 'modernising government' philosophy than by the evidence of the US evaluations, which seems to indicate the need for greater central prescription. It should be noted however that some of the evidence presented to the cross-departmental review did suggest that community engagement helps to generate positive impacts. In this case it may be argued that policy-makers did indeed make decisions based on evidence, but appear to have given more weight to evidence that supports the prevailing political philosophy.

Likewise, the decision to expand Sure Start rapidly after only a short period of operation of the first local programmes, was interpreted by some as a political one. The desire to create 'evidence on the ground' and to create a legacy, it is argued, may have superseded the more cautious approach advocated by researchers (and some practitioners) to analyse 'what works' before investing considerably more resources into the programme.

It is clear also that the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) played an important role in influencing the direction of Sure Start, not least due to the mixed early results that led in part to the decision to transform Sure Start programmes into Children's Centres. Alongside NESS, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project provided evidence to support the likely benefits of the children's centre approach. While commentators such as Jane Lewis and indeed Norman Glass felt that this particular decision was primarily a political one, there is no doubt that NESS and EPPE research findings played a key role.

Analysis of the available evidence and discussions with some of the key players suggests that the following factors helped to increase the significance of research in the policy-making process, while recognising that political and related factors are likely to mediate that influence in many cases:

- Firstly, and arguably most significant, the researchers and research institutes involved in the work that led up to the establishment of Sure Start, its evaluation and development (including for example the EPPE team) are universally regarded as being of the highest quality.
- Related to the above, the researchers (and those whose work they were synthesising) were using the most up-to-date statistical and other techniques to analyse data sets (notably the birth cohort studies) that are recognised as being of the highest quality. Informants engaged in the policy-making process emphasised the importance of quantitative research findings in convincing the Treasury in particular. Qualitative evidence was seen by these policy informants as useful in this context, but not on its own, without corroboration from quantitative findings; in contrast, some research informants felt that qualitative evidence should be seen as important in its own right. Meta analyses through literature reviews were also seen by policy informants as valuable, provided that they come to clear conclusions.
- Thirdly, as noted above, the researchers engaged in this process were willing to participate in a process of discussion and debate that was very different to the typical academic discourse. This includes a willingness to present complex research findings in different ways and to draw out clear and firm policy conclusions and recommendations (and not 'hedge the issues with 15 caveats and say "it all depends"' in the words of one key actor).
- The widely-quoted commitment of the New Labour Government to 'evidence-based policy-making' may have been a key factor in attracting researchers to become involved in policy discussions, in the expectation that their work would be taken seriously and make a difference. The relatively healthy state of the economy and the public finances at the time also helped to create an atmosphere that encouraged interest groups and researchers to come forward with new ideas.
- Research groups such as NESS and EPPE have been willing to engage on a regular basis with the media (including popular newspapers, magazines and radio) to discuss and explain their research.
- Fifth, flexibility on the part of research teams such as NESS and EPPE to respond to changing policy requirements is very important. This was helped by the fact that in both cases policy agencies were the primary funders; nonetheless researchers went beyond contractual obligations to create what some have described as 'co-production' between policy and research interests.

- Such a 'co-production' model relies also on the existence of government officials, practitioners and indeed politicians who are interested in, and recognise the importance of, social research. There is clear evidence that this was the case in relation to Sure Start. The fact that Sure Start was a politically popular initiative was a key issue, for example in relation to the reaction to the 2005 evaluation findings. In the words of one informant 'they couldn't stop Sure Start even if they wanted to.'
- Finally, it is worth reiterating the importance of key individuals in this process, most notably Norman Glass, but also many others that were involved.

4.2 The role of the ESRC

On the face of it, the ESRC may appear to have played a limited role in the process through which social research has come to play such a significant role in the development of an important policy initiative. Further investigation, however, paints rather a different picture whereby ESRC investments helped to support the skill base underpinning much of the key research and in particular to ensure that key data resources were available to undertake vital research and to feed into the ongoing evaluation of Sure Start.

- The most significant ESRC contribution to the cross-departmental review and associated research was through its support for the 1958 and 1970 Birth Cohort Studies, which provided a substantial and robust data base which John Bynner (and many others) were able to use to examine the links between early years experiences and later outcomes.
- A number of other researchers who have been supported by ESRC over the years have also used BCS data to contribute to the wider research literature on social mobility and associated topics. Examples include Paul Gregg, Stephen Machin and Mark Wadsworth, but there are many others.
- The Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS), which itself is an example of co-investment between ESRC and government bodies, has played an important role in NESS, by providing a robust comparison group. Given that an RCT approach to the evaluation of Sure Start was ruled out, MCS provided a useful resource to enable a robust quasi-experimental approach to be established.
- While the core funding for the NESS and EPPE projects comes from government sources, many of the team members have received ESRC funding prior to or subsequent to the Sure Start programme. Examples provided through key informant discussions include Edward Melhuish, Kathy Sylva, Sarah Joffe (Institute of Psychiatry), Catherine Gibbs and Margaret Brown (Oxford).
- ESRC has provided core funding for some of the research institutes that have been engaged in Sure Start-related research. These include the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion.
- Finally, and least easily evidenced, the ESRC plays an important role in the development of young researchers who support the work of leading researchers and often become leading researchers themselves.

In conclusion, the Sure Start story demonstrates the important role that can be played by social research and social researchers in the policy-making process. As a

major supporter of social research and funder of postgraduate research training
ESRC plays an important, albeit largely indirect role.

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