

What impacts has Sure Start had on  
children and families?

Evidence from the National  
Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS)

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# National Evaluation of Sure Start 2001 to 2012

- Implementation
  - What do programmes do?
- Local context analysis
  - In there community level change over time?
- Impact
  - Do programmes affect children and families?
- Cost-effectiveness
  - How do programmes spend money – and is it effective?

# NESS Research Leaders

- Edward Melhuish (Executive Director)
- Jay Belsky (Research Director)
- Jane Tunstall (Director, Implementation)
- Jacqueline Barnes (Director, Local Context)
- Pam Meadows (Director, Cost Effectiveness)
- Mog Ball (Implementation, Themes)
- Martin Frost (Local Context, Geography)
- Alastair Leyland (Statistician)

# Impact study Research design

Quasi-experimental (RCT rule out by Government)

Control group?

Cross-sectional phase,

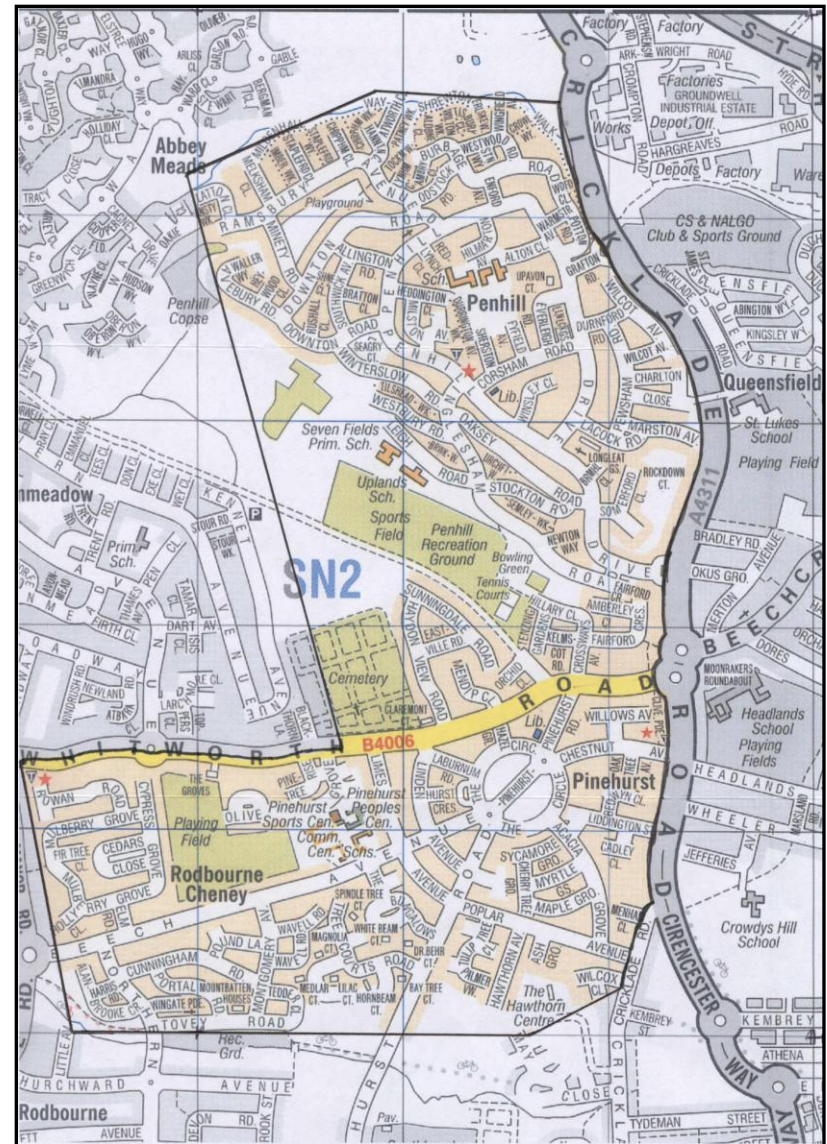
Sure Start-to-be waiting list controls

Longitudinal Phase,

Propensity matching to select controls from  
Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

# Use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

- Boundaries drawn on paper maps by SSLPs
- Boundaries digitised onto Ordnance Survey co-ordinates.
- Postcode centroids mapped in each SSLP area.



Sample paper map of a Sure Start area.

# Impact study

Recruited at 9 months, randomly from those living within Sure Start Local Programme areas

Postcodes to DWP who provided potential participants (random sample) based on Child Benefit records

- First phase, cross sectional
  - 9 month (12575) and 36 month (3927) olds in 150 rounds 1-4 areas
  - Comparison (1509 and 1101) in 50 SSLP-to-be areas (R 5)
- Longitudinal study
  - 9192 children seen at 9 months followed at 3, 5, and 7 years
  - Comparison group (1879) from Millennium Cohort Study, areas propensity matched for disadvantage

# 2005: Cross-sectional results

## Total sample

- Less household chaos at 9 months
- Less harsh discipline at 3 years

## Among non-teenage mothers (86% of total):

### Parents (child age 3)

- Less harsh discipline in SSLP areas

### Children age 3

- Greater child social competence in SSLP areas
- Fewer child behaviour problems in SSLP areas

# 2005, child outcomes (3-year-olds)

## Among teenage mothers (14% of total):

- Less child social competence in SSLP areas
- More child behaviour problems in SSLP areas
- Poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

## Among lone parent families (40% of total):

- Poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

## Among workless households (33% of total):

- Poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

# Changes to Sure Start from 2005

## Following evidence from the NESS (and EPPE)

- Sure Start Local Programmes became (non-area based) Children's Centres
- Services were more clearly specified
- Clearer guidance given on service delivery
- Greater staff training
- Available nationally (plan for 3500 by 2010; increase from 500 SSLPs)

# Longitudinal Results, 3 years (2008)

Of 14 outcomes 7 showed a significant difference

## Parent

- Lower Parenting Risk Index (observer rating + parent-child relationship, harsh discipline, home chaos)
- Better home learning environment
- More total service use

## Child

- More positive social behaviour (cooperation, sharing, empathy)
- More child independence / self-regulation (works things out for self, perseverance, self-control)
- More child immunisations
- Fewer child accidents

# Did SSLP effects vary by subgroups?

Looked at subgroups by 6 demographic characteristics

- child gender
- ethnic group
- teen / not teen mother
- lone parents
- workless households
- income (below poverty line or not)

Concluded that the SSLP effects **did not** vary substantially for the different sub-populations

# Longitudinal results, 5-year-olds (2010)

Significant effects associated with SSLPs

Parents

- Mothers reporting greater life satisfaction
- Less chaotic homes
- Better home learning environments
- Greater reduction in worklessness in Sure Start families

But

- Less attendance at school meetings

Children

- Children better physical health, less likely to be overweight

At **3** better social development in SSLPs but not at **5**

## **Change 3 -> 5 years for measures repeated from age 3**

Mothers in SSLP areas relative to comparison areas:

- 1) More positive change in life satisfaction,
- 2) More improvement in the home learning environment,
- 3) Greater decrease in harsh discipline (i.e., greater improvement).
- 4) Greater decrease in workless status (from 9 months to 5 years).

# 2012 - Impact age 7 years

## Parents

- Less harsh discipline;
- More stimulating home learning environment;

## *sub-groups:*

- Less chaotic home environment (boys only);
- Better life satisfaction (lone parent and workless households only).

## Children

- No significant findings

# Change 3 -> 7 years

Mothers in SSLP areas relative to comparison areas:

- 1) Greater improvement in the home learning environment;
- 2) Greater decrease in harsh discipline;

*Sub-groups, mothers in SSLP areas*

- 1) Greater improvement in life satisfaction (lone parent and workless households only).

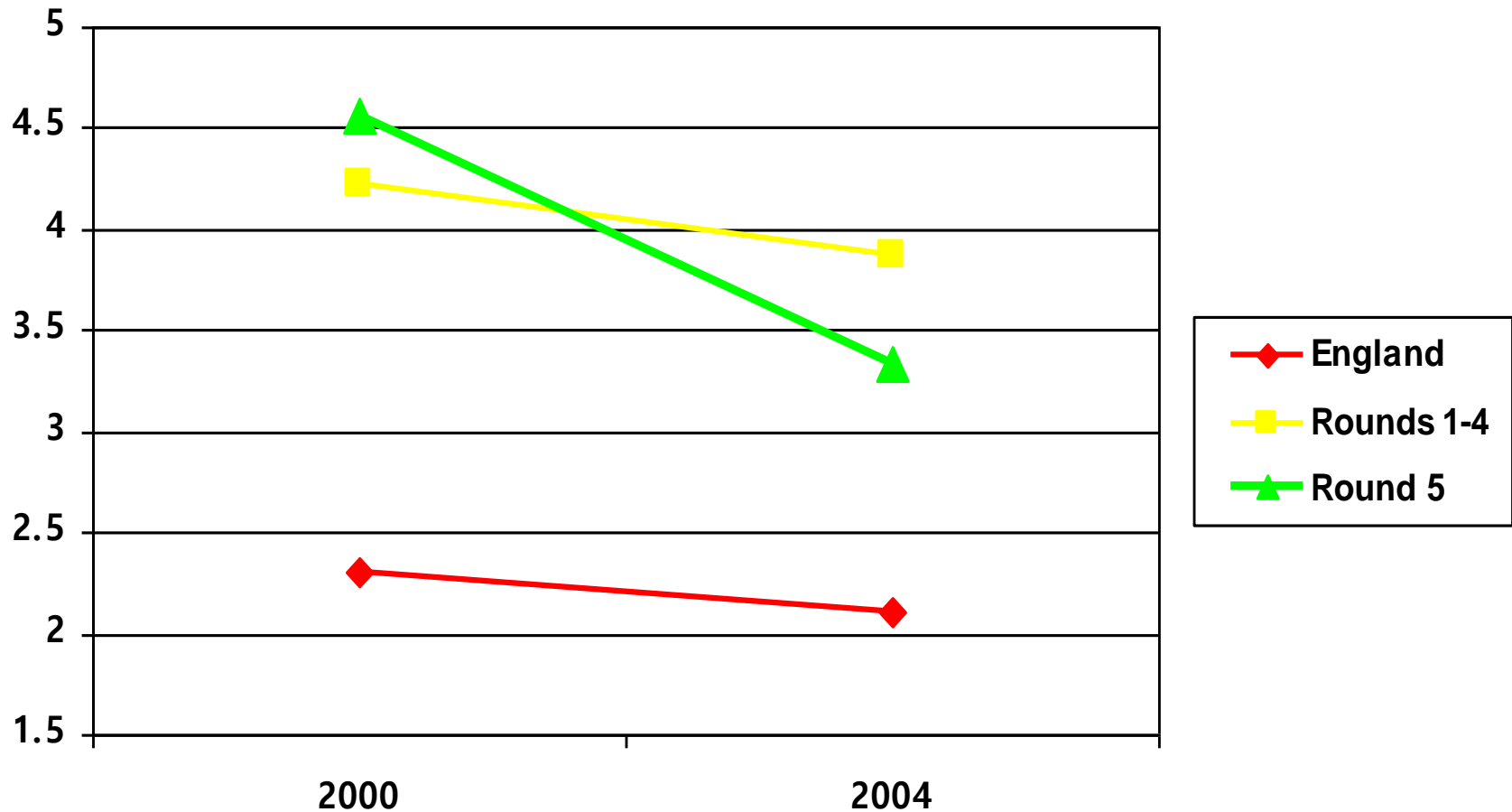
**In summary,** starting out and possibly growing up in SSLP areas had beneficial effects:

- i) On family functioning and maternal well-being that persisted until the children were age 7, with some improvements over time, more so than control group;
- ii) Beyond age 5, no identifiable impact on child outcomes, likely to be, at least in part, because of the introduction of universal free preschool education for all children from 3 years in 2005 whether in Sure Start areas or not. Children's Centre model focussed on early education and care, but across many areas, not only original SSLP areas.
- iii) Might be methodological, KS1 no sensitive enough?  
Time between MCS and NESS 2 years?
- iv) Might also relate to early SSLP area characteristics (e.g. size, demographics, quality of services, extent of deprivation)

## **Why does IFS find Sure Start effects not in NESS study?**

- NESS studied children born in first years of SSLPS, Rounds 1-4, because government insisted on early results, despite contrary advice
- Many took several years to spend their total budget and particularly capital spend, to build their centre, so no centre for some of the 9 month olds followed longitudinally
- IFS study involves children born over the first 5 years of SSLPs including R 1-6, so Sure Start had more time to bed down and get its services organised and be more efficient and effective.
- Lesson: New interventions need to bed down before evaluating

# Area level- more decrease in mothers <18 in newer Round 5 areas, possible learning from earlier Rounds



# Future - Marked success for some Sure Start Children's Centres

- Case study of a Children's Centre in London, in a Federation with a primary school – all services from conception to age 11 including health, childcare, early education, parent support and primary school.
- Staff and parents loved this way of working, with costs no greater than for separate services.
- **Department for Education results showed that this primary school out-performed all others in the country.**

# Conclusions

- The IFS work has demonstrated that children from the specific SSLP areas have a number of positive characteristics, compared to those whose families did not have that experience
- NESS identified consistent parenting differences for families who, at least at the time when their child was 9 months old, were exposed to the SSLP integrated services close to their home. This is likely to have promoted child development in ways not clear for these first Sure Start families at age 7 but in the long term has made a significant difference.
- A well functioning Children's Centre with integrated services can make a substantial difference to parents and children