

Despite initial mistakes, the success of the Sure Start programme has been to prove that government does have a role to play in the development of young children.

Mistakes made in estimations of time-frames and complexities meant that Sure Start did not deliver all the scheme promised. Yet [Naomi Eisenstadt](#) argues that the scheme's one great success has been to rule beyond doubt that government must fulfill its responsibilities in regulating and part-funding a child's development.



1997 seems a very long time ago, yet much of the current discourse on family, the critical importance of the first years of a child's life, and the disparity of outcomes across social class seems to echo the debates in play nearly 15 years ago. What is different is the infrastructure of services available for families with young children, the significant improvements in maternity and parental leave arrangements, and the general acceptance now that government does have a role to play in the lives of children between the provision of maternity care around birth and the entry to school around five years.

The creation of Sure Start did not on its own change the landscape, but it was and continues to be, a major contributor to how services for young families are delivered. [Providing a Sure Start](#) describes how and why Sure Start was established, how it has changed and what we have learned about policy development and implementation through those changes.

A strong feature of the Labour Government in 1997 was the desire to develop policy based on evidence. So firstly, we must ask if Sure Start was, in fact, evidence-based? Certainly there was substantial evidence that suggested that provision of the right mix of early years services could improve outcomes for children in poverty. But the actual design of Sure Start owed more to the key principles in the wider 'modernizing government' agenda, than to evidence gained through programmes that had been rigorously evaluated. This agenda called for joined up policies that ensured government departments collaborated on service innovation. It called for user not provider-led services and both cutting edge innovation and evidence of what works. The programme began life aimed explicitly at all families with children under four years living in particularly poor areas. A strong emphasis was placed on user involvement in its design. Indeed, plans were rigorously interrogated for evidence that local people had been involved in identifying particular neighbourhood needs, and new activities and services were responsive to what local parents said they wanted.

While the emphasis on local engagement was consistent with the modernizing aim to be user-led, it inevitably meant that, in its early days, Sure Start was not a standardized, manualised intervention delivered with fidelity; it was 250 different programmes designed to meet a common set of core aims but with a strong view that communities were different, and therefore needed different sets of solutions.

Local flexibility was a strongly held principle for the many voluntary organisations that the Treasury consulted when it considered what should be done for young children. The Treasury took submissions of those working directly in the field as hard evidence and ministers, civil servants and key players in the field, working directly with young children and families, all agreed that local flexibility to a set of common core outcomes was the best way to run Sure Start. This clearly has some resonance with the current new 'localism' agenda. Only academics argued that without a standard set of inputs evaluation would be very challenging. But the academics lost the debate and indeed, evaluation did prove extremely challenging.

As Sure Start grew from 250 to 500 local programmes, and then to 1000 children's centres, the next big debate was about governance. Local programmes were pretty autonomous; loosely supervised from teams in the government offices of the regions. Three key developments led to the handing over of responsibility to local authorities: the development of Every Child Matters, bringing all issues to do with children under one senior officer at LA level meant it did not make sense to keep services for very young children separate. Secondly, it became untenable to keep Sure Start isolated from the other key policy areas of early education and childcare both of which were already firmly in the hands of local government. Finally, the programme just grew too big to oversee from Whitehall. By 2004, with the publication of [Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children](#), Sure Start became rolled into what has become the broader policy framework for all services for children from pre-birth to school. Children's centres became an integral part of this framework with 3,500 promised: one for every local neighbourhood.

So, what were the mistakes? The biggest mistake was not understanding the complexities of running a Sure Start local programme. Joining up local services across health, education and social welfare, commissioning a major capital project, working collaboratively with local parents, understanding the critical nature of data about the local population were all critically important factors in running a successful programme. However, often the individuals who had these skills knew little about young children and came from other career backgrounds. The early years workforce was then low skill, low paid and low status. People worked incredibly hard but we did not build a professional development programme to support this new workforce.

The second big mistake, aligned to the first, was that we vastly underestimated how long it would take to establish the services. Most of the programmes spent huge amounts of time in the first year just commissioning construction work. It took about 3 years to get a programme up and running while there was an expectation of improved outcomes within months. It is now clear that some of the disappointing results of the first outcome study were because very little was actually happening.

The disappointments were about the failure to deliver any real cognitive gains for children. Yet the social and economic gains for parents were substantial, and in time these improvements for parents may deliver the longer-term improvements in the life courses for children.

The substantial success of the Sure Start scheme has been that the argument about the role government should play between birth and school is now won. We never did a randomised control trial to prove that children benefited from school. We no longer need to deliver more evidence that the pre-school years are vital to children's development, and that provision of services for young children and families is critically important. The debate on what those services should be, delivered by whom, aimed at parents or children, and at what age group care should start will run and run. However, the acceptance that there should be provision for such services, and that government has a role in regulating and at least partly funding this, is now firmly in place.

Providing a Sure Start, by Naomi Eisenstadt, from *Policy Press*, is [out now](#).