

THE EVALUATION OF SHARED FOUNDATION IN YORK

YORK LEA AND NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

PROJECT REPORT FOR PERIOD 2002-2003

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The context for the evaluation

This document is the second report in the local evaluation of Shared Foundation Community Partnerships (SFCP). SFCP is an authority-wide initiative where York primary schools are working in partnership with their local early education and childcare providers to develop high quality, integrated, community-based provision for children and families. This provision includes early education for children in the Foundation Stage of learning alongside the development of wraparound care for before and after school provision and holiday provision. It also includes extended day-care provision that might incorporate early education and would also include provision for babies and younger children. This latter provision may be being made in private day nurseries or with childminders. Overall, SFCP constitutes a comprehensive and innovative package of community-based provision for children and families that is emerging now from previously disparate and/or loosely connected provision.

Since 1998, the National Childcare Strategy has required local authorities to develop integrated approaches across all early years' providers (to include the maintained, voluntary and private sectors as equal partners) under the auspices of the EYDCP (Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships). SFCP in York grew out of an authority-wide review of First Admissions to primary school during a period when local and national concerns about the detrimental effects of formal teaching-learning experiences on four year olds were prevalent.

The expansion of childcare places in relation to employment and Lifelong Learning opportunities is also a national priority. In relation to this aspect of SFCP, York LEA with York EYDCP were successful in gaining DfES funding for the wraparound element of Shared Foundation, as one of five national pilot projects aimed at developing wraparound provision.

This local evaluation of SFCP and the national evaluation of the five wraparound care projects are therefore complementary research projects. The contract for the national evaluation was awarded in June 2002 and the Project Manager was appointed in July 2002 as this local evaluation of Shared Foundation completed its first year. The complementary nature of the two projects will emerge as the evaluation of SFCP progresses.

Five aspects were agreed as a framework for the local evaluation of SFCP. The first project report presented findings under each of these headings. A summary of the findings of the first year's evaluation is included here for reference and to support continuity of discussions, organised into the five headings:

Quality experiences for children

- Benefits for children include strong perceptions of seamless transition from one provision to another, as local partnerships develop strong working relationships.
- Parents see the provision of play-based learning and high quality care and education as being important reasons for why Shared Foundation was introduced.
- Providers and local policy makers also value the play-based curriculum linking the two aspects of the wraparound day – early education and complementary childcare.

Parental expectations and needs

- Playgroups were a key provider for children in the sample.
- Parents and practitioners are showing common ground in their articulation of benefits for parents and children in the new working practices in terms of flexibility of provision and making good choices for children.

Building bridges across local providers

- Practitioners and managers state that networking within and across local partnerships is beneficial in recognising and overcoming organisational difficulties. The LA is a main facilitator of cross-sector, professional development opportunities.
- Partnerships are identifying a need for childminders as partners. Their relative isolation may make it more difficult for childminders to perceive the relationship of Shared Foundation to their work-role. At this time, they may also feel especially vulnerable in relation to accountability and may perceive the initiative to be in some way linked to their accountability.

Leading and managing local partnerships

- Making local partnerships work is demanding but rewarding for managers and practitioners bringing about parity of esteem alongside new working practices.
- It has emerged at a time of a national focus on a wide range of early years' issues concerning education and childcare and this is seen as beneficial for the continuity of Shared Foundation.

Subsequent to the completion of the first report, it is perhaps worth adding here that the changes to the new Admissions Policy, emerging as they did from funding constraints within the LA (see below for further detail), might have undermined the continuation of SFCPs but respondents in the current evaluation do not feel this has been the case.

Support and structure from the local authority.

- From the outset, Shared Foundation has been supported at counsellor and senior officer level.
- The implementation of deferred entry is seen as an integral part in sustaining local partnerships financially and in relation to quality provision for young children.
- There is a consensus amongst councillors, officers and practitioners that the capacity for inter-department and inter-agency working in York is a strong foundation on which to build Shared Foundation.
- The funding arrangements for non-statutory children in primary school settings is a national issue with substantial local implications in relation to Shared Foundation.

Some additional contextual information

The initiative is referred to above and throughout this report as 'Shared Foundation Community Partnerships' (SFCP). However, the initiative as it stands at this point in time has a history; a context within which it evolved to its current form. The documentary analysis referred to below and undertaken as part of this phase of evaluation for the period 1997-2003 provides an account of this evolution and documents events, decisions and emerging policy which has shaped and underpinned the current project/initiative. These events shaped decisions about a range of terms that were used to describe the initiative before it became known as SFCP.

The first term used was 'Option 5'. During 1999, an authority wide review of first admissions to school was being undertaken in conjunction with the EYDCP through its Admissions sub-group. Five options were being consulted upon across the authority. The fifth option was that children would be admitted to primary school at the beginning of the term after the term in which they were five (in keeping with the 1944 Education Act). On 15th September 1999, the EYDCP received information on this consultation process and unanimously recommended to the local authority that Option 5 be adopted. The EYDCP recommended that:

- Seamless progression be developed across settings
- There should be a working towards the development of community partnerships with schools
- LA resources should be used in creative ways
- Infant and primary admissions should be seen in a broad context
- Space in schools should be used creatively and become a community resource
- Parents should understand the principles behind a new admissions policy.

On the 11th October 1999, this decision was ratified by the Education Committee and 'Option 5' was adopted as the first admissions to school policy for the authority

Around March-April 2001 the main descriptor for the project was changed to 'Shared Foundation'. It was used on the first project newsletter issued in April 2001. The newsletter advertised the times and places for local cluster meetings for all interested parties from across all sectors to find out more about 'Shared Foundation' – the 'foundation' being the integration of care and education.

By March 2002, projected losses for the authority had begun to emerge relating to the projected later entry of children into primary schools. Job losses were anticipated in schools as a result of falling budgets. In April 2002 a second consultation process relating to the first admissions policy to school was undertaken. A subsequent recommendation from this was to return to school entry in the term the child was five but with two entry points per year. The Local Authority recommended that the deferred entry option (i.e. that children need not be in full-time schooling until the beginning of the term after the term in which they are five) was to be highlighted and positively promoted for parents across the Authority.

In January 2003, local Project Board minutes reiterate and detail the strongly emerging context of community-based partnerships, drawing on the reflections of Board members and emerging outcomes from the local evaluation. In March 2003, the Project Board received and discussed papers relating to the Extended Schools agenda. By May 2003 there were 40 partnerships in the authority, already marketing their integrated services and beginning to incorporate Family Learning opportunities and recognising the benefits of more formal links with speech therapists, Health Support etc. The Project Board then took the decision to adopt the term Shared Foundation Community Partnerships to describe this expanding initiative.

Data collection for the period 2002-2003

For the second year of the evaluation it was decided to further investigate the process of developing partnerships and explore the characteristics of those partnerships. Three case studies had been developed in year one of the evaluation and these would now be extended with a further ten case studies of varying types of local partnerships. Building also on year one data collection, it was also decided to look in more detail at the role of the local authority, as leaders and implementers of policy. This involved a survey of the documentation associated with the initiative over the last six years and interviews with key local authority personnel.

The data collection encompassed:

1) The development of **10 case studies** to supplement the three pilot study case studies in the first evaluation. This involved a visit to each setting in each partnership, interviews of individuals active in SFCP development and local evaluator attendance at a partnership meeting. The following criteria were used in selection of the 10 case study partnerships:

- The number of partners within a local partnership
- The sectors from which each of the partners within a partnership were drawn
- The size of the primary school
- The geographical spread of the partners
- The geographical location in the city of the partnership
- The length of time in existence as a local partnership
- The extent to which cohesion might be influenced by local links established prior to the formal partnership emerging
- Aspects of management and leadership within the partnership
- Views about the viability and potential of the initiative
- Emerging patterns of meetings to develop the partnership – e.g. frequency and purposes.

All respondents received copies of their partnership case study for approval and where necessary amendment prior to the anonymous submission of the case studies to the Project Board. The development of the case studies has been used to underpin and structure this project report.

2) **Documentary analysis** of key SFCP policies, minutes, consultation documents and letters from the beginning of SFCP and spanning the period 16 June 1997 – 15 July 2003. This data has been incorporated into this report to describe some contextual aspects above, but so far, remains relatively unexploited.

3) **Interviews of 20 parents** selected by the partnerships from across the ten local partnerships involved in the case Studies.

This report combined with the ten case studies and the report from parent interviews provides the evidence base from this second year of evaluation.

Findings from the Case Studies and the documentary analysis

Based on the case study data and the documentary analysis, four areas have emerged as encompassing key issues at this stage of the development of SFCPs. These four areas are:

1. The stages of development in becoming a partnership – towards effective working practices;
2. A community based model in action, leading to meeting children's and families' needs through seamless provision;
3. Key issues around the funding of SFCPs;
4. Looking to the future.

1. The stages of development in becoming a partnership – towards effective working practices.

It was generally agreed by the partnerships that the requirement for an action plan was a useful first step in beginning to think and act collaboratively. This was most effective where all partners, across the maintained, voluntary and private sectors began, at this point, to feel that their voices were heard equally and that no one sector had 'the loudest voice'. From this point forward, the sense of equal participation and momentum in the establishing of a partnership identity would grow (or not) dependant upon:

- The frequency of partnership meetings (half termly seems optimum, having high impact);
- The extent of the partners involvement in subsequent activities (e.g. developing flyers or brochures to advertise the partnership in the community, producing a first newsletter, analysing questionnaire returns from local parents relating to their childcare needs and organising a partnership open evening);
- The speed with which questions and uncertainties were responded to, and the clarity of response, by the local authority representatives/development workers;
- The extent to which a mutual feeling of respect became apparent for the potential of every partner to provide a quality (but different) form of provision;
- The extent to which school staff in particular were welcoming and supportive of private and voluntary sector partners.

Creating these as 'the right conditions' took up considerable time and created additional workloads for all members of the partnership management groups. Effective partnerships, where clear forward momentum is evident, are operating on two levels – a formal level through regular meetings and exchanges of information etc. and informally through long evening phone calls, social events etc.

In general, individual and collective commitment to SFCP grew out of a commitment to the authority led vision around 'getting it right for young children and their families in York'. For playgroup members and childminders in particular, they were reassured by their sector development workers (from PLA and NCMA) that the authority valued their contributions and saw them as essential to the success of the initiative. The documentary analysis shows this area to have been constantly in focus and under discussion in a variety of forums (e.g. EYDCP full and sub-group meetings, SF Project Board meetings), over an extended period prior to and paralleling the establishing of the local partnerships. This appears to have made a significant contribution in maintaining momentum and in encouraging partnerships to be innovative in a new initiative where no precedents existed.

Partnerships seem to 'leave the starting block' much faster when there are already existing links across partners. Whilst interviews have shown that individual providers have learned a great deal about other local providers through the partnerships, they also show a wide range of (often previously unacknowledged) pre-existing links that could be built upon once the partnerships became formalised.

Partnerships are beginning to reflect on the impact of changes in personnel in relation to their emerging identity as a partnership. The potential annual changes in playgroup committee structures are one aspect. New headship appointments are seen as potentially impacting (heads are key figures in partnerships as the partnerships centre around the local school or schools) especially if the head comes from outside the authority and knows nothing about the initiative.

Some preliminary reflections on partnership stages suggest there may be four stages of partnership development emerging:

A loose confederation – perhaps best describing the early stages of partnership development when informal 'historical' links form the basis of explorations of partnership;

A conjoined partnership – when initial partnership members have coalesced, an action plan exists and early meetings are underway to discuss target achievement in action plans;

An integrated partnership – when partnership members feel unified and equal.

An holistic partnership – when the 'whole' becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

This model may be useful as a basis for further exploration and discussion.

2. A community based model in action, leading to meeting children's and families' needs through seamless provision.

From the evaluation a strong community theme is emerging in the process of partnership building as existing links are being developed between schools, pre-schools, child-minders and out-of-school provision, in the formal context of the partnerships. In some partnerships, the SFCP encompasses a whole village community which provides considerable scope for planning round children's and families' needs on a larger scale that may extend well beyond education and childcare.

At setting level, the initial SFCP staff have welcomed clear written guidance from the local authority, relating to forming partnerships and making contact with other local providers, to support forward movement; this has been crucial in sustaining momentum. In some cases, the guidance has not always progressed to all partnership members but has been most useful when brought to partnership meetings and discussed and understood by all partners.

Community partnership is demonstrated in the unique York EYDCP response to setting up networks of area SENCOs and QTSSs. The decision to locate the curriculum leader role and SENCO roles within the partnerships has been very well received. Several have responded positively to the location of one of these roles outside the school sector and this increases feelings of value and respect within private and voluntary sector personnel.

In terms of beginning to work together, partnership members have focussed initially on understanding, planning and delivering the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage. This has been welcomed by all sectors and allowed providers to more clearly identify their common ground across different settings. However, it has also been pointed out that shared planning could mean a limited as well as a coherent day to day experience for young children using more than one setting. One partnership, realising that planning shared topics or themes over the same period was leading to children duplicating experiences, have planned a rolling programme of themes over a two year period to avoid duplication, but to allow for ideas and resources to be shared. At the start of each term the partnership providers, comprising of nine early education settings, circulate their medium term plans between one another, so information is shared and duplication avoided.

Where partnership staff are able to visit one another's settings they are increasingly able to give key information to their own parents about what is available in the area and about what will occur when a child makes a transition. This is reassuring for parents and children and staff are pleased to have been of service in this way.

A community planning issue is seen in the concerns that have been expressed in some partnerships about the opening of new private day nurseries, seen as potentially threatening the viability of existing providers. SFCP management committees feel that they should be consulted in relation to decision-making for proposed new services and that this would facilitate the integration of any new providers into the SFCP initiative for the area.

For the adults working in the community settings there are career opportunities and career development through involvement in children's activities. In many partnerships there are significant local 'movers and shakers' for children - nursery owners/managers, playgroup management committees and staff, childminders, out of school management committee, school staff and governors.

In all partnerships career opportunities are becoming apparent for mothers involved in the SFCPs. The progression from voluntary to paid worker is evident across partnerships, as is the progression from provision-based activity to management-related activity. In several partnerships, workers are involved in more than one setting thus inter-connecting the maintained voluntary and private sectors more substantively. This provides continuity for children, and staff can bridge the transfer from one setting to another, providing a reassuring familiar presence for youngsters as they move on. This can be from toddler group to playgroup, from nursery to school or from out of school to holiday provision.

This pattern of staff (often parents of previous or current generations) working across settings, or moving employment from one setting to another, creates local networks of significant people. Where children attend more than one setting they know that adults know one another. It is possible that children derive comfort and security from this knowledge. There may be an additional spin off for children if adults can share information relevantly and sensitively between settings.

SFCPs have built up quickly where partners are in close geographical proximity, or in distinct geographical areas, although not necessarily all on one site. Several partnerships are exploring the potential for re-location, especially of the local playgroup within the school site.

3. Key issues around the funding of SFCPs.

There continue to be substantial concerns in some local partnerships about the viability and sustainability of local playgroups. Whilst these have always, inevitably been affected by changing numbers of young children, and some more than others, nevertheless, they have continued to make provision in a local area. Being partnership members has brought benefits to some playgroups, more especially in partnerships where they have come to feel valued as offering quality. Where other providers recommend them to parents this has some positive impact on increased numbers and so on sustainability.

One playgroup has a thriving parent and toddler group – which is not formally a part of the partnership. The viability of the toddler group – dependant entirely on parent fees, to cover rent and running costs – is linked to the viability of the playgroup. If playgroups cease to attract children to take up education places their own financial position is threatened, as few playgroups can survive on childcare fees alone.

Mention has been made by several respondents of how it can be tempting in these days of tight budgets for school governors to continue recruiting young

four year olds to reception classes and to recruit part-time into reception classes. This has wider financial implications for other providers. Where SFCPs have responded to local authority recommendations to discuss the implication of these issues in SFCP management committees, partners feel more positive about progress in relation to these difficult financial issues within the partnerships.

Some partnerships, more than others, are actively engaging with and promoting the benefits of deferred entry, in keeping with local authority policy.

Partnership members welcome budget transparency for even small sums of money that are available for partnership development through extended wraparound provision. Discussions about use of the money can be unifying for partnership committees.

In relation to the further development of wraparound places, some partnerships have experienced difficulties with understanding and accessing NOF funding. Some SFCPs have had debilitating set backs where working groups have invested considerable time in unsuccessful bids because particular criteria were not met.

Some local conditions for expansion, whilst needed within the community are not NOF fundable. SFCPs are 'casting around' for funding possibilities and expansion possibilities and many seek specific guidance on this in order to progress. Larger, well established groups are able to expand sessions or activities using existing resources, but this is only possible where premises are available and staff are willing to increase their hours.

Mention has been made above of formal and informal links helping to cement and forward move the SFCPs. Inevitably, personnel are subsidising the success of the venture through unpaid activity, borne of personnel commitment to the wider initiative and its value within their community. The overwhelming majority of unpaid workers helping SFCPs to succeed are mothers.

Partnership members have welcomed local authority provided training opportunities that have enabled them to build their partnerships and to look forward to extending their partnership activities in the best interests of parents and children. This has implications for the use of local authority training budgets.

4. Looking to the future

The partnerships appear to be developing in identifiable stages, not necessarily in parallel with one another, so that there are different models emerging at different rates across the city. It will be important to continue tracking these developments over time to identify how the whole model progresses.

The initial expectation of recruiting partners around schools has several variations, dependant upon geography – partnerships in the centre of the city, often having a nursery class, have a different constituency to those in small

peripheral villages, whilst several partnerships in suburban areas are made up of two schools and their shared early years providers. Many partnerships are including childcare for older children up to eleven as a secondary stage of development. Others are establishing a regular pattern of open evenings to showcase the services provided by the partnership to parents and the wider community – building on the success of earlier meetings. As the partnership development workers have become established in their role they are able to support and help to initiate contacts with other children's services, or share practice across partnerships. Their roles will undoubtedly develop further as partnerships move into new modes.

Some general trends are emerging in the gaps in wraparound care, although these do differ from partnership to partnership. Common areas are the development of lunch clubs, a need for more childminders (most effective and rewarding for childminders when part of a local childminder network; this offsets possible feelings of isolation) and the establishing of out of school clubs. A majority of partnerships have growing/strong links with local, private day nurseries. In terms of developing wraparound provision, childminders point out that it should not be assumed that they are available to make lunchtime provision for children who are moving settings if they have 'buggy-based' children in their care also. It may be helpful in forward planning, authority-wide to more clearly identify the wraparound 'gaps' within and across partnerships.

Training and resources tend to have been planned around early education and the Foundation Stage rather than around childcare. In the early meetings, agendas have focussed on the Foundation Stage and SEN issues to reflect national priorities. However, in some cases, this has made the business of the meetings seem less relevant for childcare providers such as out of school providers and some childminders. All interests should be reflected in agenda setting.

Partnerships are attracted by the prospect of joint training opportunities but do not wish to be isolated from other SFCPs. Partnerships are looking to include other members of staff in each local setting in partnership activity, possibly through wider/shared representation on management committees, possibly through more visits to settings. Partners continue to seek ways of more actively involving their own governing bodies/management committees in SFCPs. Partnerships are beginning to look at ways of involving local parents in their management committees. All the above may be future training/development issues.

In relation to their development, it may be appropriate to consider how evaluation findings will be disseminated to all local partnerships to support their continued evolution.

Well established SFCP management committees are now looking to sub-committees to take responsibility for key area of partnership evolution such as finances, extending wraparound in the community, publicity etc. A further stage of development for one partnership is the setting up of a bank account for the partnership, to separate funds and to make payments transparent. It is hoped that additional money might be forthcoming for joint ventures and

resources, to spend on early education and childcare. Development worker role would seem essential in continuing to spread 'good practice' around partnerships and to collate it centrally within the authority.

The organisation of the SF partnership committees have the scope to be expanded into a wider planning forum, to include complementary services such as child health surveillance, community based therapy, Family Learning and some family support services, such as parent and child drop in sessions, and parenting groups. This will require authority-wide decision-making.

Whilst communications across providers have increased and whilst workers agree that this enhances the quality of the transitional experience for children, some concerns continue to be expressed about children's attendance at multiple settings. In particular there are concerns that recognise that:

- as parents become more familiar with what is available, children are more likely to be attending multiple settings, and,
- the administrative systems in place, especially in schools, are not currently sufficiently flexible to accommodate varied patterns of attendance for individual children.

Partnerships are looking forward to the development of transfer records that can follow children across settings. Some partnerships have developed their own common documents, which include comments from the child and their parents, but which are taking time to be used by every provider in the partnership.

The ten case studies reflect the range of development and demonstrate the potential of the SFCP model. However, after only four years of existence they are potentially vulnerable to any substantial changes in local and national policies. They have been created on limited resources, with many practitioners investing substantial amounts of time and energy in the process, some of it paid for but much of it unpaid. This time and energy have not been expended reluctantly, and the evaluation reflects an overall optimistic picture of partners who would not wish to return to previous arrangements and relationships. Sustaining the partnerships and developing joint provision will require continued local authority support and the creation of and integration with new policies around Extended Schools, Sure Start Children's Centre and Neighbourhood Nursery models, with appropriate resourcing to support the implementation of the policies and the continued expansion of this innovative initiative.