



Evaluation of the Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project:  
Room to Play

Maria Evangelou, Sally Smith and Kathy Sylva  
University of Oxford Department of Education

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## **Section 1: Room to Play – Why a drop-in with a difference?**

### **a) Introduction**

This report is the first stage in the evaluation of *Room to Play*, an innovative, three year project run by the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) and funded by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation. It will introduce the concept of a ‘drop-in centre with a difference’ and examine the theoretical and policy context of the provision. It will then go on to give a roughly chronological account of the project including a detailed exploration of its aims and objectives. These provide the framework for discussing and analysing the first three months of operation.

*Room to Play* is a drop-in centre; a drop-in centre with a difference. It is based in a shop located in a busy community shopping centre at the heart of one of the most deprived areas of Oxford. The shopping centre is an important resource for its community, not just as somewhere to shop, but also as somewhere to ‘go’. It is well used, not only by local people but by others who travel across the city or from local towns to spend both money and time there. The target group for ‘the shop’ are the users of the shopping centre, whether they are there to shop or simply ‘hang-out’. Everyone is welcome but the shop is consciously located in a venue that attracts many parents who are unlikely to be accessing any statutory provision and who, in short, would never set foot in a drop-in centre.

Users are greeted by the staff, as if into their own home. They are offered a cup of tea, a place to sit and chat, someone ready and willing to listen, and basic facilities such as somewhere to warm bottles, change nappies and a bathroom. Similar to a conventional drop-in centre there are indoor and outdoor play activities for children and babies and lots and lots of books. However, the play activities are part of a well established, evidence-based programme (PEEP) that is founded on a clearly documented curriculum designed to support parents and carers in understanding and facilitating their children’s learning through everyday play and interactions.

So the shop IS a drop-in centre, but it is trying very hard not to look like one. It is hoping to appeal to a broad group of people including those who may not otherwise choose to go to a drop-in. It also aims to offer a range of curriculum-based play and learning activities in such a way that nobody is alienated by an atmosphere that they may find off-putting or intimidating. It is attempting to build relationships between staff and users in such a way that all this is possible.

## **b) The Evaluation**

The Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation have funded an independent evaluation by Oxford University Department of Educational Studies to take place, in three stages, over the full term of the venture. Phase one of the evaluation took place from February to June 2006. The overarching aim of this phase was *to 'evaluate' the first four months of the initiative against its projected aims and objectives and to identify any unexpected outcomes / successes / shortcomings.*

In this report, the aims and findings of the evaluation are contextualised within an attempt to tell the story of 'the shop' from its conception, through a difficult but important gestation and finally to the 'reality' of the first three months of its operation. It is also a record of how an idea with a strong theoretical rationale and clear links with contemporary policy is being translated into a very real and concrete situation. However, in addition to the narrative description, the initial stage of the evaluation has offered the opportunity to critically appraise the process by noting and exploring the tensions and ambiguities which inevitably occurred along the way. Subsumed within this is Hannon's recommendation that any evaluation must ensure that it reflects the values in the practice (1997). Establishing just what these values are has been one of the challenges of the first stage of the evaluation.

Data was collected from records and documentation provided by PEEP, observations, informal discussions with staff and users and formal, semi-structured interviews with all staff on the project. These were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using

MAXqda, a software package for analysing qualitative data. This report is a synthesis of ideas generated by a combination of these methods. The 'voices' in the report are those of the staff, managers and practitioners. They are not individualised but are illustrative of general points and themes. No attempt has been made to establish outcomes but to document process and to set the framework within which stages two and three of the evaluation can take place. It is anticipated that these will focus, firstly on the quality of the provision and secondly, on its impact on the users.

#### **a) A gap in the provision**

Social exclusion is what 'happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown. When such problems combine they can create a vicious cycle' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). There is a growing recognition that the issues are multi-faceted and interlinked and that long-term factors drive disadvantage and life chances for children (Hills and Stewart, 2005). Attempts to unpack the factors which culminate in social exclusion have increasingly focused on the inter-relationships between social class, poverty, educational achievement and success in the labour market.

The work of Bynner, Joshi and Tsatsas (2000) comparing birth cohorts from 1958 and 1970 suggests that social class and parental educational level have a significant influence over a range of educational and social outcomes for children at age 16. Their findings lead them to conclude that there is 'remarkable stability in the processes through which some of our respondents had gained access to successful and fulfilling lives while others were excluded' (Bynner *et al.*, 2000, p.40). Consequently, the dynamic of disadvantage is almost inevitably intergenerational; 'Children suffer from the social exclusion of their parents; the psychological and social barriers start very early on in a child's life and contribute to their own identity' (Bird, 2004, p.3).

However, Bynner and Joshi (2002) conclude that the potential negative effects of social class on both employment and occupational achievement are substantially mediated by the level of educational qualifications gained. Such evidence on the 'mediating' effects

of education raises the question of intervention and where it can be most effectively targeted.

According to a recent study by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, since the election of 1997, there has been a step-change in attitudes and policy to intervene in the cycle of poverty and social exclusion (Hills and Stewart, 2005). Of these, none has been more notable than the Sure Start initiative, established early in Labour's first term 'to ensure that children and families in disadvantaged areas have access to the services, opportunities and practical help which enable young children to flourish from birth ....so they are ready to succeed when they start school' (DfES, 2001 p.19). This concept of joined-up, community based provision is focused on the importance of parenting and a commitment to supporting families. Sure Start Local Programmes have recently been modified into Children's Centres (currently in the 20% most deprived areas) and the model has been widened to incorporate extended schools (expected as universal provision by 2010).

Despite this increase in awareness, research and provision, the reach of these new services is questionable. Tunstill, et al. (2005) report that the local programmes established in the first round of funding 'saw an average of 30% of children each month, in the three months to September 2004' (p. 22). A more optimistic figure provided by Hannon (2006) in a detailed analysis of reach in one Sure Start Local Programme, found that over a twelve month period 50.8% of eligible families accessed at least one available service. There is also the additional concern that use of services is in an inverse relationship to need. Barlow, *et al.* (2003) argue that 'despite evidence concerning the need for, and effectiveness of, early intervention programmes, there is also evidence to show that there is often a low uptake on the part of those individuals who stand to benefit most from the intervention' (p.181). There is evidence from interventions targeted at families perceived to be 'at risk' that the least vulnerable were most likely to take up the offer of support (Murray, Woolgar, Murray and Cooper, 2003; Barnes, MacPherson and Senior, 2006). Murray (2000) found that women who chose not to participate in a health visitor support programme were younger, less well educated and in less stable relationships. She also demonstrated that, over time, these women had poorer outcomes

related both to their own and their children's well-being. Such individuals and families who do not readily access available provision have come to be termed "hard to reach".

It should be noted however, that there is also evidence that families most at risk do not benefit from, and may even do less well following, an intervention (Love et al., 2002; Xiang et al., 2000). In their study of why some women chose not to take part in a home visiting intervention, Barlow, Kirkpatrick, Stewart-Brown and Davis (2005) found that the reasons were many and various but that one important motivation was to avoid adding yet another element into a life that was already disorganised and chaotic. It seems a reasonable supposition that, under such conditions, interventions may become an additional burden and that this may account for their possible negative impacts on those they are intended to benefit.

Clearly then there are some vulnerable families who neither actively seek and use available provision (either group- or individual-based) nor choose to accept a more tailored home-based service. Consequently, there is a growing interest in, not only documenting the characteristics of families who decline the offer of services but also seeking to identify the reasons for refusal in order that practice can be modified to be more in sympathy with their needs. In addition, the possibility that an intervention itself can make things more difficult for the most at-risk families must be recognised.

One innovative approach would be to develop a service not contingent on the user making any special arrangements or commitment to access the provision nor on the provider identifying and contacting a target group of potential users. But this raises questions: What kind of service? Where could it be offered? Who could provide the concept and the delivery?



#### **d) An innovative partnership**

##### **The Sutton Trust**

The Sutton Trust was established as a grant making charity in 1997 with the aim of challenging educational inequality, both through research and by providing educational opportunities for those from non privileged backgrounds. It supports work from the early years, through primary and secondary schooling, to further education and beyond. It believes in targeting disadvantage from before birth and focuses on supporting parents in the early years, so that as their child's first educator they can help to give them the best start in life (The Sutton Trust 2006).

##### **The Garfield Weston Foundation**

Founded in 1958 the Garfield Weston Foundation is a UK based, general grant-giving charity that has helped a wide range of organisations with grants of varying sizes. Recent rounds of funding have helped projects in the following categories: Arts, Community, Education, Welfare, Medical, Social, Religion, Youth and Environment (The Garfield Weston Foundation 2006).

##### **The Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP)**

When the PEEP intervention programme began in 1995, it was conceived primarily as a literacy intervention with an expanding focus on numeracy, self esteem and positive dispositions to learn. It was intended to benefit children from an economically disadvantaged community in Oxford, compromised by their lack of skills and confidence by the time they made the transition to secondary school. Its short-term aim has always been to foster reading readiness thus allowing each child to maximise their potential within an education system that requires (and often assumes) a certain level of literacy skill.

PEEP's aims and practice are centred not on the children themselves but on the relationship between adults and children, which PEEP considers to be at the heart of learning. PEEP works with families from the child's earliest weeks, and the curriculum makes explicit the notion that babies are active social beings and learners from the outset. It supports parents, encouraging them in their role as their child's first and most important educator, not by 'teaching' their child, but by 'communicating' with them in the context of everyday play and interaction.

Integral to the curriculum is the ORIM framework. Originally designed by Hannon (1995) as a means to encourage shared literacy activities between adults and children, it has been adapted by PEEP into a structure for supporting parents and carers in making the most of day-to-day life with their children. The framework recognises that children need:

- Opportunities to learn;
- Recognition and valuing of their early achievements;
- Interaction with adults in learning situations;
- Models of literacy and numeracy behaviours, learning strategies and dispositions.

PEEP in Oxford is actively offered to all families within its catchment area. It was initially delivered within group settings but the modes of delivery have now expanded to include home visits, home programmes and open access groups. It is also incorporated into playgroups and the Foundation Stage classes in local schools. Consequently, it is difficult to calculate the 'reach' of PEEP but it is estimated that approximately half the families from the catchment area have some kind of direct contact with the programme before their child is six years old. Like many other providers, PEEP is continually working to attract more families to their existing provision and seeking ways to modify their programme and delivery in order to broaden its appeal.

Over the last ten years, PEEP has grown and developed and the principles and practice of PEEP have become widely disseminated throughout the UK and beyond. PEEP trains practitioners (currently over 1500) using a model of PEEP based on an established and

well documented theory and offers a methodology to put the theory into practice. However, the application of the model, responsive to local need and circumstance varies from community to community. A good example of this is documented in the evaluation of PEEPO in Ellesmere Port (Barrow and Thurston, 2005).

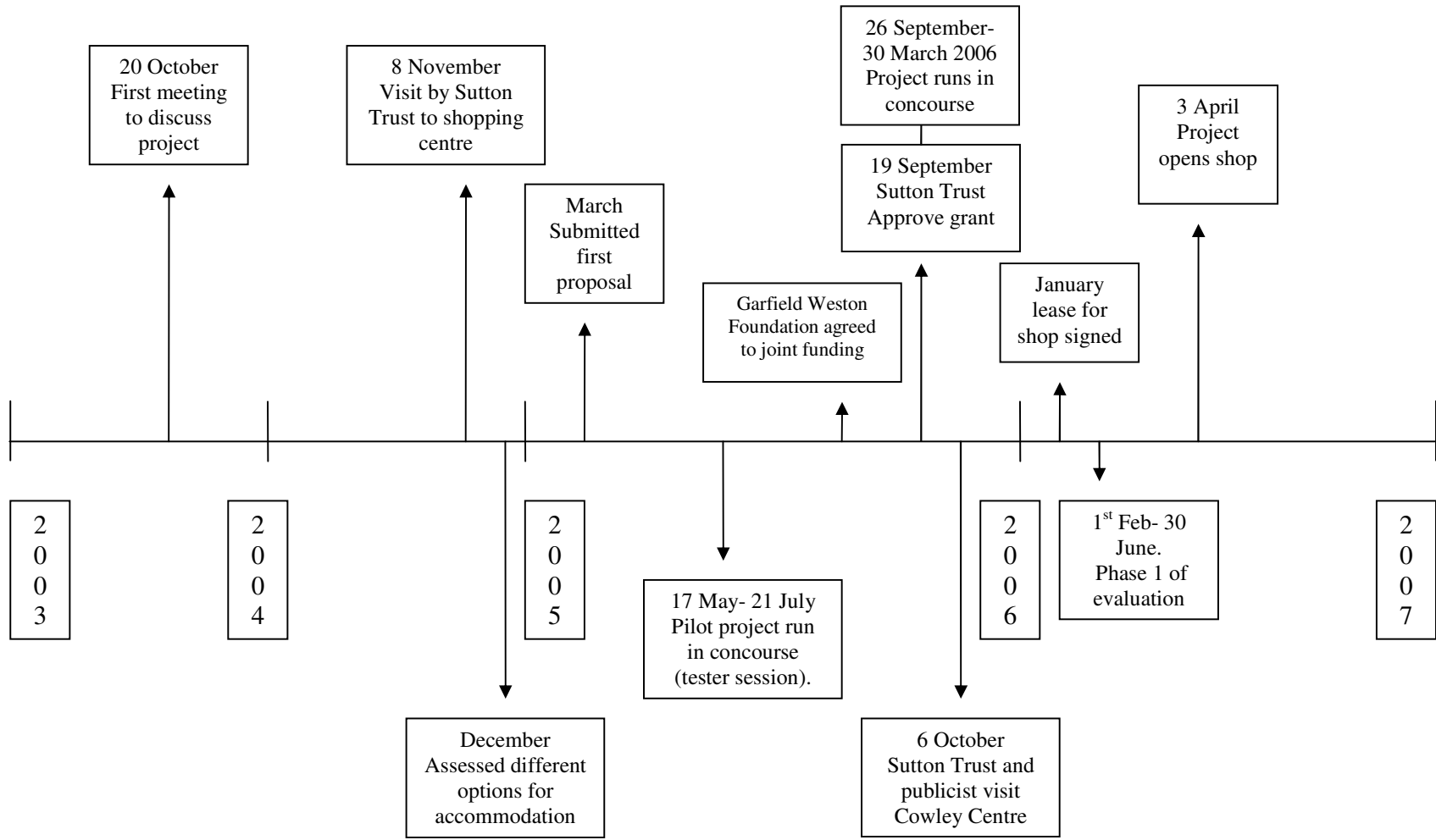
In late 2003 the Sutton Trust were inspired to look for a partner in a project to deliver services in a location already frequented by possible users. A space within a supermarket was initially considered and soon rejected in favour of a shop within a community-based shopping centre. 'Something' along the lines of a drop-in centre was considered. These are not that uncommon nor are advice centres such as the Citizens Advice Bureau. However, the project needed a means to, not only welcome and value more isolated parents, but also a means to extend rather than simply reflect their existing practices. With its clear ethos, established curriculum and a commitment to a flexible, responsive mode of delivery, PEEP already had the 'tools' to work to this agenda as well as a training programme which, if the project were successful, could disseminate the model. They became the obvious choice of a partner for the project.

## **Section 2: The Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project**

### **a) Project Time Line**

Nearly two and a half years have passed since the project was first discussed. A specific timescale of events is summarised below.

Time Line for the Project



## **b) Finding a Location**

By June 2004, the basic idea had been agreed between the Sutton Trust and PEEP. Funded by the Trust, PEEP would lease a shop within the Templar's Square Shopping Centre (known locally and by everyone on the project as 'the Cowley Centre'). It is a community-based shopping centre at the hub of the four neighbourhoods which comprise the PEEP catchment area. None of these areas are well served by local shops. By contrast, the Cowley Centre has a variety of shops including High Street names such as *Dorothy Perkins*, budget shops such as *Wilkinson's* and a number of charity shops. It also has two supermarkets (*Co-op* and *Somerfields*), a green-grocer, a bakers and a large, central cafeteria. Over the years it has become established as, not only as 'the' shopping centre for the area, but also as an important social centre and meeting place. It is (mainly) enclosed and is relatively warm and spacious with a congenial, 'intimate' atmosphere quite unlike that found in the city centre shopping malls. It also undoubtedly attracts many of the families that are considered "hard to reach"; some of whom clearly spend many hours there each week.

Consequently, the Cowley Centre was considered an ideal location to offer some kind of provision and PEEP undertook negotiations with the complicated configuration of owners, managers and letting agents who all, and at different times, had some responsibility for negotiating leasing arrangements. The process took over a year, during which the ownership of the centre changed hands, until a mutually acceptable arrangement could be reached with the new owners (who own ninety similar shopping centres around the country) and a lease could be signed for three years.

## **c) Talking to users of the shopping centre**

Meanwhile, the PEEP management team began to talk about the project with their staff and in October 2004 also undertook a mini-survey within the shopping centre asking users about the kinds of provision that they would like. A PEEP practitioner working with a young parents group between November 2004 and March 2005 also collected information about what provision the group members accessed and where they perceived the gaps. The ideas generated were relatively simple: somewhere to 'go' with

your child when you are out shopping, a place to feed and change a baby, somewhere to sit and have a sandwich with your children and toilet facilities. Respondents also expressed a certain amount of cynicism which suggests that they were not expecting to have their ideas taken seriously. This is possibly the origin of one of the tensions in the project that continues to be explored now that the shop is open; listening carefully to users and attempting to meet the needs that they express balanced with the commitment to offer something that goes beyond the simple reflection of existing practice. In other words, trying to provide things that the users want or need as well as things felt to be beneficial or even edifying that users are unlikely to acknowledge a desire for. Play activities were not mentioned as a priority and certainly nobody stated they would like to have PEEP in the shopping centre.

#### **d) Recruiting staff**

Recruitment was accordance with accepted PEEP practice; the project was explained to all staff who were then given the opportunity to express an interest in working on it. Because the project was still very much in the developmental stage, the explanations were quite vague and, on reflection, all of the practitioner staff remain quite unclear about their initial involvement. However, at some early stage in the genesis of the project, three key practitioners were recruited, two of whom had a great deal of experience within PEEP and the third with some PEEP and a lot of playgroup experience. In addition two PEEP assistants were drafted from their work as assistants in groups. One speaks Bengali, Urdu and a little Hindi. The project was initially managed by the Programme Manager (groups and settings). After the management of PEEP was restructured in October 2005, this role was taken by the New Projects Manager. It has always been overseen by the Chief Executive Officer.

Most PEEP practitioners felt some initial reservations about the project which proposed a form of delivery very different from anything offered by PEEP in the past. However, they all became increasingly committed over the intervening months both with planning for the shop and working on the stall (see below).

### **Section 3: What the Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project hoped to achieve**

The aims and objectives of the project were set out in a formal proposal that was submitted to the Sutton Trust in March 2005.

#### **Aims**

1. To engage parents who are often termed “hard to reach”;
2. To develop a model for a drop-in centre based in a ‘neutral’ venue that should be easier to access for more isolated families.

#### **Objectives**

To offer:

- i. A welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day;
- ii. An opportunity to talk to practitioners about their children;
- iii. Directed and undirected play and learning activities;
- iv. Information about children’s services.

These seem perfectly clear and reasonable and they ‘make sense’ given the theoretical context of the project and the ‘gap’ in provision that the shop was aiming to address. However, over the intervening year before it opened, these aims and objectives did not remain set in stone but were given a new ‘reality’ as they were articulated, discussed and interpreted by the managers and practitioners on the project. During this period the staff were working on a pilot for the shop by operating ‘a stall’ in the concourse of the Cowley Centre. This practical experience also had an impact on the way that the aims and objectives were given meaning by those involved. In order to fully understand the ‘values’ in the practice, unpacking their complexity as they ceased to be abstract notions and became embodied in the day-to-day life of the project, is highly illuminating.

#### **a) To engage parents who are often termed “hard to reach”**

“Hard to reach” has become an accepted term amongst policy makers and service providers, but in practice it is extremely difficult to agree an acceptable definition of those to whom it applies. Milbourne (2002) suggests that

*‘there is no easy consensus on the scope of problems or where boundaries might be drawn....they may suffer linked problems such as low income, lack of employment, low skills, low self–esteem, poor health and housing conditions, high crime environments, family break down and mental illness’ (p.287).*

There is also evidence from interventions targeted at families perceived to be at ‘at risk’ that it is the least vulnerable that are the most likely to take up the offer of support (Murray et al., 2003; Barnes, et al. 2006).

In a recent analysis of the factors influencing the acceptance of volunteer home-visiting support offered to families with new babies, Barnes et al. (2006) found that neighbourhood disadvantage was the characteristic most strongly associated with rejection of support whereas factors associated with acceptance were higher maternal qualifications, more children, and family health or mental problems. The authors conclude ‘many of those accepting support were better off in socio-economic terms although there were other reasons why family life might be stressful’ (p114).

The rationale behind the shop was to cite it within a disadvantaged neighbourhood, in location already frequented by families who may be considered “hard to reach” as the means to realising its primary aim of ‘engaging’ with such families. However, establishing whether particular users of the shop are themselves ‘hard-to-reach’ is highly problematic.

*They don't come out of a book, do they?*

The managers and the practitioners, all of whom have extensive experience of working with families, recognise that there are certain demographic characteristics that are readily associated with the term (which in programmes/studies which attempt to selectively recruit participants are seen, with some good reason, as ‘risk factors’). Nonetheless, all were quick to point out none of these characteristics, such as age, ethnicity or educational qualifications could on their own, or even together, add up to an adequate definition of ‘hard-to-reach’;

*....you think of poor, people with children not nicely dressed – but that doesn't always work – it's what's behind them – all the baggage that they are carrying that doesn't show – if you've got a nicely presented child, all dressed nicely – it*



*doesn't show what's behind them - there are different sorts of families that need things...*

*....I know young parents are important – but – you can't put them in a box – I don't feel comfortable with that – I mean, I was a young parent....but I did everything I was supposed to and coped really well....and there's lots of young parents like that who do a really good job because they know people are looking at them – and you get some parents in their 20's or 30's that find it difficult to cope....*

However, although they rejected the term as a convenient label, the staff did recognise 'a truth' in the term and, either spontaneously or when asked by the researcher, strove to explore what the concept meant for them. Confidence and self-esteem was frequently mentioned;

*....I think they always feel judged, that they are not doing....that they are not being a parent in the right way, they are not doing things how you would like them done or if they don't go to this group or join this or do this then they are not being good parents and they keep away from all those sort of places and people – they try to avoid all that....*

*....I think that people who are “hard to reach” don't always want to trust people – they feel that they are being questioned or let down – being judged on their standards – on what they have and haven't got – where they don't live - that sort of thing....*

The lack of trust was felt to extend particularly to people in 'authority';

*'...they don't like health visitors and people poking their nose in – do-gooders and stuff – they don't like those sort of people and so they avoid those sort of situations....'*

Above all, how a parent interacts with their child/children was seen as paramount; an inability or 'unwillingness' to engage with their children being regularly cited as a reason for believing a family to be “hard to reach”;

*....the whole thing of inability to engage, and I use that in a very loose sense, is a far more accurate description I think of hard-to-reach...*

*....and I suppose, people that have found parenting quite difficult, they don't enjoy their children, they feel guilty 'cos they don't enjoy their children and they don't really like playing with them - they are 'hard-to-reach' 'cos they don't really want to do anything with their children...*

There is also the question of agency. It should not be ignored that families can and do make active choices about whether or not to use a particular service and that it can be programmes rather than families that are “hard to reach”. This has clearly been considered by the project team.

*They're not necessarily hard-to-reach - maybe they don't want what you're offering basically I think is a lot to do with it - they don't want what you're offering to a certain degree – they have different priorities.... what is more important or if things are just too much.....*

However, when staff discussed the aims and objectives for the shop with the researcher, there was a clear sense that engaging with ‘hard-to-reach’ families, however difficult it was define them, was going to be a priority in the shop. It was also acknowledged that the engagement that they would like to see, at least with some families would be at a very basic level – one that might easily be taken for granted.

*...I think it is just seeing how fun it is to play and have fun together and all the different things you can use - encouraging both of them really to have a nice time and share ideas and activities together and sharing a book... and you just making time for each other really, together – enjoying their babies or the older ones....*

However, it was recognised, for a number of reasons, that the shop needed to attract a cross-section of users. Firstly, it was understood that any service that appealed exclusively to “hard to reach” families would quickly become stigmatised. Secondly, a mix of people, who could potentially influence and learn from each other, was anticipated as a benefit of the project. Finally, it was fully accepted that ‘anyone’ could benefit from the services on offer in the shop, either in terms of the curriculum or because they would welcome support in some other way, including simply some respite during shopping!

In addition, the staff felt that one of the possible obstacles to the success of the project would be if the shop developed a ‘cliquey’ atmosphere and became dominated by one particular group of users. The fact that it would be open to all and exclusive to none was perceived as one of the most important characteristics to preserve.

**b) To offer a welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day and an opportunity to talk to practitioners about their children**

In the interviews conducted with staff prior to the shop opening, there was a great deal of consensus about these two objectives which were very clearly articulated both by the managers and the practitioners on the project:

*.....simple, fun, relaxed, friendly – just the same atmosphere as your front room*

*..... a place where you can go ... be welcomed and get basic information and support when you need it about just about anything – the focus in a sense will be around your child because that is the process that is unthreatening – but simply a place where people will listen and where you can go in without feeling nervous or worried ....those are the two things that are going to make it accessible for people who don't use other things and if it is welcoming and totally none threatening then the chance is that it will work....*

*.....for changing, toilet, having somewhere to feed their child, as well as having the time and play once they've been shopping or perhaps just before shopping to make it a little bit easier for the child and adult and I think it is important that it's not just for the children - it's like for both – parents should feel comfortable and be able to have some time for them as well, perhaps collecting information, sit and have a cup of tea, talk to an adult - and whatever else we can sort of provide – a telephone number for some information or something – and sometimes just to have that chat, knowing it doesn't go any further but you just need to off load....or someone to hold your baby while you go to the loo!.....*

There was a real acknowledgment from staff that life with young children is hard work and that parents and carers are often tired to the point of exhaustion. They were also highly aware, from personal experience, that shopping with young children can be one of the most stressful parts of the day. All of the practitioners expressed a determination that the shop should, at one level, be there as a respite for families and as an incentive to make shopping easier. In discussing this particular aspect of the shop, it was noted that there should be no 'hidden agendas', that parents and carers should have no sense that they are welcome only if they behave in a certain way or agree to go on a course or read a certain leaflet.

### **c) To offer directed and undirected play and learning activities**

PEEP is an early learning intervention based on a curriculum, structured around the ORIM framework, that is delivered to parents not to children. Implicit in this objective is the implementation of the PEEP curriculum via the play and learning activities in the context of the shop. The PEEP programme aims are:

- To promote parents' and carer' awareness of children's very early learning and development through making the most of everyday activities and interactions;
- To support parents/carers in their relationships with their children so that the children's self-esteem will be enhanced;
- To affirm the crucial role of parents/carers as children's first educators;
- To support parents/carers in the development of their children's literacy and numeracy;
- To support parents, carers so that they can encourage the development of positive learning dispositions in their children;
- To promote and support parents' and carers' lifelong learning.

In order to meet this objective, there have been two challenges. The first has been to adapt a curriculum based on a structured delivery to groups or individuals or on an open-access drop-in setting to the unstructured setting of the shop where users may stay for five minutes or five hours (see section on curriculum). The second is a dilemma inherent in the whole concept of the shop; that it is attempting to attract a client-base which includes parents who would not choose to participate in a curriculum-orientated service along side others who actively seek ways to support their children's learning. It is not therefore simply a case of adapting the curriculum, but finding a way of offering it that is extremely flexible and unobtrusive. In some ways, it is a 'hidden agenda' and both management and staff are acutely aware of this conflict.

*.... the people we want to work with are the people who aren't coming to our existing provisions so what we do there, even though it will have the same original aims will have to be positively very different.... in terms of how we introduce the child development and talk and interactions and play and*

*possibilities.... I think what everyone is very committed about is that it will be very different - It's not just an alternative premises and then when people come through the door we just do PEEP groups, it's not how its going to be, we are going to be respectful of the fact that we are working with people that haven't gone to those things and probably wouldn't go to those things, so it is a light touch and low key ...*

*.....once we've made the relationship with the parents and we've got those hard to reach parents to actually come to the table and play with children, and you build a relationship with them and then you can start dripping in these bits - 'oh they're learning so and so' or 'that's really good, doing that 'cos they're going to get this out of it' – but - not bombard them as soon as you get to know them, but as the relationship builds then sort of drip in bits of what they're learning and hopefully, the parents will have fun with their child....*

*....just having fun - but you know can have fun with your children, it doesn't always have to be sat down at a table - they can do about learning about numbers in a different sort of way including the play but - not everybody would - realise or see it - but just to learn to have fun and to play with their children, or listen to what their children are saying - because I find as a parent sometimes you think "oh this is how he plays with something" - and you don't always step back and think "well maybe let's see how they play with it....."*

Although the practitioners were aware that the PEEP curriculum is primarily delivered to parents, in the reality of the shop they realised recognised that the play and learning activities themselves would be the 'way in to' the interaction with the parents. They were also very aware that some children have incredibly restricted opportunities for play at home:

*...the aim of the play activities is to have fun, new experiences, lots of different experiences - you know - there's lots of children haven't even held a crayon, or played with playdoh - so - lots of experiences, playing with new people, making new friends.....*

Staff also discussed the possibility of offering directed play activities more akin to those available through more traditional PEEP groups such as a 'Story Time'. There was however a strong consensus that these need to wait until staff were convinced that they would be appropriate in the context of the shop.

#### **d) To offer information about children's services**

All staff involved in the shop were clear that one of the objectives was to provide a range of leaflets and flyers about relevant services and sources of support. They also assumed that they would be able to give information to users based on their own knowledge and expertise about local provision. The original proposal to the Sutton Trust suggested that there would be a role for other agencies, not only in providing information, but also services from the shop. However, all staff felt quite ambiguous about this, concerned that the overt presence of 'others' such as Health Visitors or Midwives could be off-putting or intimidating to the very families that the shop hoped to attract:

*.....at first I thought it could be a bit like a Sure Start, everyone getting involved and it would be a good thing – they would say you've got all the parents so we'll come to you because we can't reach them - but then those services are out there and if families are not going to them and they are not reaching them, perhaps they should be asking why not or questioning what they are doing...*

It was clear from both management and practitioners that their priority was to make the shop welcoming and accessible to a broad range of families and that this could be best achieved by not having workers from other agencies present in the shop. They did not rule it out for the future and it was suggested that the users could be consulted on the type of information or services that they would like to be offered.

#### **Section 4: The stall - "A really important accident!"**

As time passed and the lease was no nearer to being signed, the PEEP management began to think of some kind of interim arrangement that would establish a presence in the shopping centre and begin to build a client base which could then be transferred to the shop. After further discussion with the Sutton Trust, who agreed to provide funding for four months over the summer of 2005, it was decided to open a 'stall' in the concourse of the shopping centre. It aimed to operate as a pilot for the shop and would offer three important components that would finally be incorporated into the shop:

- Play activities based on the PEEP curriculum

- Information in the form of leaflets
- Advice and support for adult users from staff

It was open from May 2005 to July 2005 and again from September 2005 until end of March 2006, 4 days a week, Monday to Thursday; 9.30am – 2.30pm. It was staffed by a PEEP leader and a PEEP assistant. The researcher also worked some sessions as an assistant. The stall was composed of two child-sized trestle tables and chairs and two full sized tables arranged on three sides of a rectangle.

The two small tables offered play activities such as playdoh and threading. One large table was arranged with a variety of leaflets offering information ranging from local playgroups to a recipe for playdoh and the second large table displayed an advertising board saying *Stay and Play*, some photographs of adults and children playing together and a poster explaining the ORIM framework. There were small chairs around the children's tables plus a couple of adult-size ones. The 'enclosed' area of the rectangle was intended as a soft-play baby area with a duvet as the floor covering. It was scattered with baby books and a PEEP 'treasure basket' containing objects which offer different sensory experiences all made from everyday objects.

It was envisaged that the stall would be open for no more than four months. Staff were originally dubious of the concept and insecure about working professionally in such an 'exposed' position.

*I thought - I don't know if I want to sit in the middle of Cowley Centre and be one of the people who sort of instigate it and do the playing – and when I got offered some hours for the Cowley Centre work, I was like, 'oh dear!....'*

*The first week was awful; it was just like being in a gold fish bowl, lots of people just looking at you weird while you sat there ...*

*It was to start with that I wasn't ever so keen on doing it because I felt like I could be on public display....*

However, the initial reservations fell away in the light of their experiences. When the stall finally closed after nine months in operation, all of the staff reflected very

positively on its many strengths, both in terms of immediate effects and the implications for the shop.

The very central location of the stall, which had seemed so daunting at first, became one of its most compelling features. It allowed staff to make eye-contact with potential users, some of whom would pass by many times before coming over. There was no threshold to be crossed, no daunting door to be opened:

*.....that's been the biggest strength, the biggest thing - that you are right out there and in the middle of people and the families....*

*...We have had a family that we have tried to reach before and people have tried to get them to groups ...and it was only by constantly being at the stall that they then approached us and even now when I see one of them, she won't talk to me off the stall at all yet there she has a full conversation, some days....*

The very visible location also allowed children to take the initiative in drawing their parents or carers over to the stall. Many users who would have otherwise passed by were, literally, dragged by enthusiastic children over to play. Alternatively, the practitioners would leave the stall to go and chat to people who were passing. Many conversations were conducted in shop doorways, the queue for the bakery or on the surrounding benches. The duration of the stall, although it had not been anticipated or even particularly welcomed at the time, was also significant. It allowed staff to gradually build relationships with users, some of whom passed the stall on an almost daily basis for weeks before making the first contact. The leaflets were also very obviously displayed and were regularly taken by users and passers by.

When at the stall, the staff took the initiative in playing with the children. The activities were based around the PEEP curriculum which at the time was being adapted to meet the needs of the shop. The range of activities was restricted by the resources that had to be transported to and from the stall on a daily/weekly basis and their suitability for use in a shopping centre concourse. The shopping centre management were supportive of the stall but clearly vetoed any 'messy' activities and parents were like-wise wary of anything too wet, sticky or even colourful. It was observed by staff that some families



'dress up' their children to go shopping. This was taken into account in what was provided, especially as washing facilities were not available.

The ORIM framework of Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling was used consistently by staff (according to their own accounts and from observations) as they played with the children and talked to the parents. The staff were able to relate many incidents where they felt successful in engaging parents in some kind of 'unexpected' interaction with their children or where parents had returned and explained how they had utilised at home an idea they had seen on the stall.

Staff also held many conversations with the parents and carers. These varied from little bits of advice about parenting or local childcare to in-depth discussions about personal and sometimes difficult circumstances. Sometimes these conversations would be initiated by new or infrequent users of the stall; others were the result of relationships that had been built up over time.

It was also apparent, to both the staff and the researcher, that visitors to the stall were a cross-section of the users of the Cowley Centre. Establishing a viable monitoring system that not only accurately records some of the demographic characteristics of the users (such as age and ethnicity) has been difficult; whether these characteristics give an indication of whether a family is 'hard-to-reach' is almost impossible. However, it was clear, through observations and through discussions with staff, that a significant number of the families who used the stall had some issues around engaging positively with their children. The Asian PEEP assistant was influential in establishing contact with some of those with whom she shared a cultural or language background. She was sometimes asked to translate in shops or for help in filling out forms. In addition, the staff were really gifted in their ability to 'reach out' to people. They smiled and made eye-contact with far more people than actually came over to the stall *on that particular occasion*, they were greeted positively by many and were often sought out for conversation by passers-by, not all who had children with them at the time.

Most importantly, the stall offered a forum to publicise the shop. This was partly done by discussions with the users but also through 'experience'; users could see how much

their children enjoyed the activities and how nice it was to have a sit down and a chat but also it was obvious how much 'better' these things would be in a protected space where the children could move around safely, where tea and coffee could be made and children washed and changed:

*.....already on the stall, we've reached a lot of parents that haven't ever gone to groups, don't go to toddler group - and it's reaching those parents and playing with the children and doing stuff with the children and you're sort of modelling play in the hope that the parent will join in – and you do have parents that sort of sit there, to the side and aren't really doing much, chatting with their friends and we're doing pictures and then you say 'do you want to show mummy?' and then they have that interaction about what the child has done and you're sort of hopeful that if they start coming in to the shop, they may come in with their friend and sit on the sofas and chat and just leave the children to go and play but there's the sort of hope that you can build on that and maybe go and show them a picture and maybe get the parent up to the table and start playing with the child and so they realise, 'yeah, I'm enjoying this, this.....'*

With hindsight, all of the staff involved in the stall overwhelmingly felt very positive about it, as a provision in its own right and as a 'marketing strategy' for the shop. The day-to-day reality was however, not quite as rosy. It was originally intended as a short-term, interim measure and the long delay in securing the shop caused some lack of morale amongst the practitioners. It was more the uncertainty rather than the duration that was the problem and staff became anxious that they might be raising false expectations in the users.

*.....I got a bit fed up half way through because I kept saying stuff and a lot of parents, when I had spoken to them initially, specially young parents, said "oh everyone always says 'we're going to do this, we're going to do that'" and I felt a bit like that when I kept 'saying we're going to have this shop, we're going to have this shop!' - and it never happened so after a while, I didn't mention it for a long time....'*

An additional concern was the need to develop an appropriate form of the curriculum for delivery from the stall. This raised two issues; one was a lack of staff time to do this effectively at the same time as dealing with the everyday challenges of working on the

stall and secondly, the recognition that what was satisfactory within the constraints of the stall may not be appropriate for the shop.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the actual working conditions on the stall required a certain amount of stoicism from the practitioners. The location was cold if not positively arctic on occasion, there were no facilities to make hot drinks and it was not unusual for staff to remain sitting on child-size chairs for long periods of time.

Reflecting on the stall, one of the staff commented that it had been a 'really important accident'. It seems that nobody anticipated quite how significant to the project it would be. It was not without problems but it worked. The luxury of foresight would have undoubtedly led to the stall being seen as an integral part of the provision rather than a lesser version of the shop. Paradoxically, the elements that gave rise to most concerns; its exposed position and its duration, played an important role in its success. It facilitated connections with a broad range of the Cowley Centre community, particularly those who may have been initially unwilling to respond to any 'formal' provision, allowing practitioners to establish the trust and confidence of the users. It raised awareness of and enthusiasm for the shop and created a ready-made user-base for the move. It also inspired both staff and users about the potential benefits of the provision:

*.....when I actually got on there and did it, it was absolutely fantastic and it really proved me wrong and it's made me think that I shouldn't just jump to conclusions - 'cos it was absolutely brilliant - in that so many parents come - and once you're sat there and you're involved with a child - you don't take in people looking at you and things going on around you because you are so involved with the child - and the same with a lot of the parents who do play with the children, they're quite involved and it didn't matter to the children at all, or us who was doing it, or anybody else and you feel part of Cowley Centre after a while....*

## **Section 5: And finally - The SHOP!**

Prior to the lease being signed, there was a period of almost a year during which a great deal of thought and planning went into the shop. However, it was also a time of uncertainty, partly because nothing definite had been agreed regarding the shop and

partly because PEEP itself was under-going a period of reorganisation, including some redundancies. The staff who worked most closely on the project were the CEO, two successive project managers, and one of the PEEP leaders. An external consultant was employed for a time who had a role in preparing the proposal and the budget. The planning took place in a combination of formal meetings combined with much more informal discussion and sharing of ideas. After the stall opened, the other leaders became more involved, particularly in planning the curriculum.

The lease for the shop was signed in January 2006. It is located on one of the main 'avenues' leading into the centre but not within the main covered concourse. The shop itself comprises a main 'living' area and what would have been office and storage space. This is divided into a kitchen area, a separate toilet and a walk-in storage cupboard. There is a door leading from the main area into the kitchen area and a second door leading into a yard. This yard is enclosed by high wall and is approximately 10m<sup>2</sup>. (Appendix A with Cowley centre layout, shop location and floor plan).

After the lease was signed, suddenly the planning had to be intensified. All of the staff worked extremely hard to prepare for the opening. Not least, certain modifications had to take place within the shop. These included electrical and plumbing work and the ordering and fitting of the new kitchen, flooring and other fitments. This was coordinated by one of the PEEP leaders whose husband also did a lot of the physical work including fitting the kitchen.

In addition, the publicity for the shop had to be organised. This was given a great deal of consideration. The rationale behind the shop is to offer a service to families who may not otherwise access any provision by citing it in a location which those families already frequent. It was therefore felt that it would be counter-productive to advertise the shop beyond the shopping centre.

Consequently no public opening was planned. It was assumed that the stall would provide the initial user-base and during their final week in the concourse the practitioners handed out leaflets about the shop to users and passers-by. It was also hoped that word of mouth would be a powerful agent in generating an awareness of, and interest in, the shop.

Both the practitioners and managers expressed a little anxiety that the shop would be under-used (and a greater anxiety that they might be swamped) and various ideas were discussed which could be implemented if necessary to raise the profile of the shop. These included a token system to receive a free PEEP song book and CD and posters around the centre.

The fact that the shop was ready to open, on schedule on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April, was a testament to a great deal of hard work and commitment from the staff. Indeed, the practitioners felt a really extra-ordinary sense of ownership towards the project coupled with a powerful feeling of responsibility about its success.

The shop is currently divided into different areas which are designed to promote the kind of atmosphere noted in the objectives of the project as well as facilitating the implementation of the curriculum:

- A sitting area with a large sofa at right angles to the front window of the shop. The bottom half of the window is covered by a blackboard. There is usually an activity on the floor here such as a dolls house or cars/trucks;
- Two child-size tables arranged with different activities such as playdoh and bathing the dolls;
- Baby area 'enclosed' with by a bookshelf and two corner walls. Soft floor provided by a duvet and spread with treasure basket, scarves etc;
- Book corner including a chair ideal for feeding;
- An area set up for role play e.g. as a shop;
- A 'messy' area in the kitchen with water/sand/gloop type activities;
- Outside yard with activities such as sand and bricks;
- The kitchen;
- Toilet and baby changing area;
- Table facing the entrance laid out with leaflets.

The shop is staffed by two PEEP practitioners, usually one leader and one assistant although sometimes two leaders work together. Their hours in the shop are from 9.00am to 3.30pm and the shop is open from 9.30am to 3.00pm. The day is divided into two sessions and staff may either work one or both during the day. The additional hour is for setting up, clearing away, cleaning and writing a review of the sessions.

## **Section 6: Discussion and Conclusion**

At the time of writing this report, the shop has been open for three months. From the outset, everybody has acknowledged that the ultimate strengths and weaknesses of the project will not emerge until time has passed for the shop to really embed in the community that it serves. In the meantime, the evaluation offers an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that are faced, if and how they are overcome, and the lessons learnt from them. The first part of this report explored the original aims and objectives of the Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project and considered how they were contextualised and interpreted by those involved. This section will report on how these aims and objectives are being addressed during the first three months of delivery.

### **a) Is the shop engaging parents who are often termed “hard to reach”?**

A primary motive for establishing this provision was the intention to draw in families thought of as “hard to reach”. Exploring what this concept means to the people involved in this project has been an important element of the evaluation to date. It has been established that it is very hard to set criteria to define, even theoretically, the risk factors that might make a family “hard to reach”. Staff on the project did, however, have a clear ‘picture’ in their minds of the ‘kind’ of family that they were particularly hoping would access the provision; perhaps the most defining element in this picture related to manner in which the adults engaged with their children.

Clearly there are a number of families who quite unambiguously fit this ‘picture’ and who now regularly use the shop. In the majority of cases the relationship was begun when the stall was open and staff are pleased that they have made the transition into the

shop. Because these families are in quite extreme circumstances, their presence is very notable and staff are acutely and appropriately aware of their needs. It has also been noted that these families are ‘spreading the word’ about the shop to others who also are considered by staff to ‘fit’ this category. Nevertheless, it is also clear that there are quite large numbers, particularly of young mothers, who are regularly in the centre but who did not use the stall and who have not come into the shop.

However, although attracting “hard to reach” families was an explicit aim, it was also considered extremely important that the shop should be accessed by a variety users: to avoid the service becoming stigmatised; so that users could potentially influence and learn from each other and because “hard to reach” families are not the only ones who may have problems or could benefit from what the shop can offer.

The shop has been busy from the outset and all are agreed that, two months into the project, the shop is being accessed by a wide cross section of people, very much as it was hoped that it would be.

*...I think there is a wide range, we've got childminders - one runs a toddler group and a scouts group - she's got three children she comes in with quite regular - she brought in a box of teabags and a bag of currents and she said if she went anywhere else she'd be paying or have to bring these things - and she's on the ball about everything - when you talk to her she's very intelligent about child development - and then you've got right at the other spectrum where people are coming in and saying "I wouldn't have thought to do that" and "why do you do this?" and "I've never been anywhere before, never really been interested in, you know, what my child does...."*

*'I think it's the whole range, there is definitely a whole range of people...well there is lots of different cultures...lots of different levels of being able to use English...lots of different levels of education, not that I ask their education, how they come across though...age ranges, there's young mums, old mums, grannies, aunties, carers...people that are coming in for access visits...and people with loads of problems, people who probably have got problems but don't tell you about them...people with shy children, people with 'difficult' children...there's just a whole complete range....'*

Data has been collected from staff in the shop on numbers and an indication of age and ethnicity. They also record new users if that information is available to them.

It was very noticeable that many of the first users were those who had been regulars on the stall. Staff estimates vary, suggesting that up to 70% of the shop users may have visited the stall at some time. Very early on a distinction had been drawn between 'marketing' the shop and 'making it appealing' to the families who may not access other provision. It would be relatively easy to advertise in 'other' drop-in and family centres and 'comforting' to find the shop full of enthusiastic users. It required more nerve and confidence to allow the shop to build up a local reputation. However, as time passes, more users are mentioning 'word of mouth' as their initial reason for coming. It was originally intended that the stall would be periodically maintained in the concourse although this has not happened to date. If it is re-established it would be interesting to take careful note of its impact on numbers of new users in the shop.

Spending time at the shop has become part of the 'routine' for many families who are using it, either before or, after shopping. Some come to play, to talk, others for a rest or to feed or change their baby. The patterns of use also vary between users. It seems that the more 'needy' families spend longer in the shop, often being the first to arrive or the last to leave.

Health visitors have also heard about the shop and are recommending it to their clients including some who are having a particularly difficult time. An example was a mother with a two year old and a four year old who was getting very little sleep as her youngest was suffering chronic constipation and would often cry in pain and distress for long hours each night. Consequently some families are coming to the Cowley Centre primarily to visit the shop or at least are making more frequent visits than they would otherwise have made.

**b) Is the shop offering a welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day and an opportunity to talk to practitioners about their children?**



When users come into the shop, they are welcomed by the practitioners who seem to have a talent for knowing just what level of interaction is appropriate. The welcome is very significant. It would be very unusual for someone to enter the shop and not be acknowledged; this is regardless of whether it is their first time or if whether they have become a regular. All of the staff appreciate how important this first moment is and use their judgement as to how to 'handle' it:

*.....it's being able to 'read' people and how you go with them - some people are just really chatty straight off and it's just easier and they ask you lots of questions about the curriculum - others they might have said to us the week before "oh I've got to go to the doctors for so and so" then we'd say "how did you get on at the doctors, was it alright?" and just remembering little things, makes it feel that yeah, you do care - I think that's very important to make it feel welcoming and friendly - and some people they're quiet, they come in with their friend and they really don't want to talk to you...they want to come in with a mate and suss the place out first and they might get chatting about half hour later, so I think being able to read people and not pushing yourselves on them, so that they don't want to come in again....*

Users are generally offered a cup of tea or coffee, though some of the more regular visitors now utilize the kitchen quite comfortably themselves. This distinctive welcome and the 'homely' atmosphere are often commented on by the users who contrast it to 'other' drop in centres which are often perceived as 'un-welcoming' or 'cliquey'. It is interesting to note the 'attitude' of the practitioners to the shop (and to their job within it) in relation to this. All of three PEEP leaders all expressed a great deal of 'ownership' towards, and commitment to, the project. They all, at different times and in different ways, spoke quite naturally of the shop as if it was an extension of their own home. The greeting that they extend to users is, quite unselfconsciously, as if they are inviting in a welcomed guest.

*....it feels a bit like my house and then my garden and I'm just inviting everyone around really...obviously not quite in the same way as I would in my own garden, but still...*

As a consequence, although nobody is asked their name, or to sign-in or to register in anyway, the users are NOT anonymous but are somehow part of a 'family'. Being

treated as a guest seems also to set up some unspoken expectations about behaviour. This may explain why the users seem so ready to talk with each other in the way that two guests invited to the house of a mutual friend would do. It happens readily and is welcomed by many who have felt discouraged about attending different drop-in or family centres by the feelings of isolation that they have experienced when visiting them.

*.....with the users you've got one end of the spectrum to the other...but it's like really friendly because they'll both be there and then someone will join the conversation and that's it, everyone talks - and I don't know how that's happened but it does happen and it's really nice - no one has ever said they've gone and felt isolated and that everyone knows everyone....*

The skill of the staff in putting people at their ease and facilitating conversations is paramount in creating the distinctive 'front room' atmosphere of the shop. Although they speak of it as 'their' shop, the practitioners also want the users to feel the same sense of ownership and are very sensitive to any ideas and suggestions that they are given. They deliberately planned that they would open the shop with the minimum in place so things could be built on according to need, experience and the feedback from users.

This is happening and in many ways it is extremely positive. Users can see that their ideas are being put in place, for example it was suggested a 'tree' was drawn on one of the walls so that pictures could be 'hung' on it. However, it is a potential source of conflict because some of the things that users may wish for are perhaps at odds with the ethos behind the shop; it was suggested that it would be nice to have a television and many people are donating their unwanted toys. These are often the antithesis of the materials that PEEP would usually work with.

It was always felt, from the conception of the project, that the relationship between practitioners and users would be key to realising the aims and objectives of the shop. From both the stall and from the first three months of the shop, the staff have had time to build those relationships. Unlike a more 'formal' service where there is a clear distinction between the role of the professional and the client, this is blurred by the set-up in the shop where staff and users communicate in a much more relaxed and 'unofficial'

way. This is reinforced by the fact that family or friends of the practitioners often drop-in or spend time in the shop. This is a different way of working compared to their previous work either as PEEP group leaders or in playgroups.

*...I suppose in a group I was the leader and... so there is a different type of relationship because I would then be saying; “right, we’re going to do singing”, “right, we’re going to do a story now”, “right, we’re going to do talk-time now” and “that’s it we’re finished” - well, it’s not quite like that...but it’s very structured the whole thing...and there wasn’t that time to just sit and share a cup of coffee and chat about stuff, although we did, we do in groups but not so much....*

Indeed, the advice and support that the staff offer is often based on their own experiences. The researcher queried this with them, concerned that they would feel lack of a ‘boundary’ between their work and their personal lives. They all, however, felt in control of what they chose to share with users and considered that what they could offer from personal experience helped to establish the relationships on which they could build the interactions around the child’s learning and development. They pointed out that they had not lived ‘untroubled’ lives and the fact that they were able to empathise with the situations experienced by some of the users was important.

*....I don't know if I am asked but I do bring my experiences in to everything – yeah, I mean the fact that I’m a single mum and have been for many years is relevant in lots of occasions... I don’t want to be seen as a health visitor you know, it’s like “actually I live on Blackbird Leys too!.....”*

However, they are sensitive to their role as listeners and wary of ‘taking-over’ in a conversation. It was also emphasised by the practitioners that they felt it important that they are seen by users as part of the same community and certainly not as a ‘middle-class do-gooder’ in a position of authority:

*...we are seen as one of them, not some jolly hockey-sticks boffin that’s coming in and “trying to tell me how to run my life” ...I don’t know how to explain it, but not coming across as you know better and “I’m ‘posher’, and I’ve got a degree and I’ve done this and I’ve done that” ....not being that sort of person, being an*

*ordinary person from the community, I feel sort of accepted a bit more if you know what I mean....*

Nevertheless, despite their roots in the community and their acceptance by users as ‘one of them’, the staff are trained practitioners highly aware that their role is a professional one. In summary, one of the great strengths of the staff is their ability to bring a professional attitude and a ‘distance’ into highly personal conversations in a way that is both non-threatening but also potentially challenging for the user. They are very conscious of their role, not only to support parents and carers but also to help them move on in some way. It is a way of working with parents that has been characteristic of PEEP since it became established. It is a stance that is distinctive of other innovative programmes which are attempting to appeal to vulnerable families and is articulated by Barlow et al (2003) in their paper on the development of a home visiting service:

*Vulnerable families often feel disempowered, disenfranchised and marginalized. Working in partnership has the potential to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy. Vulnerable families may also lack experience of trust and acceptance in relationships. The partnership model involves the home visitor communicating a number of these attitudes, including respect (i.e. taking a positive stance towards the parents without being judgemental), empathy (i.e. attempting to understand the world from the viewpoint of the parents) and genuineness (i.e. being open to the experiences and constructions of the parents with as little distortion as possible). It is assumed that the relationship will also be enhanced by enthusiasm and humility (in order not to undermine the parents’ own confidence and ability). Particular emphasis is given to the skills of active listening, involving parents, exploring their difficulties, providing appropriate information, empathizing, clarifying and challenging parents’ constructions (p.178).*

The context of the shop is particularly favourable in creating an ideal opportunity for these kinds of relationships to be established.

**c) Is the shop offering directed and undirected play and learning activities?**

The simplicity of this statement masks the challenge at the heart of the service that the shop is attempting to provide; that of implementing a highly structured curriculum within

the unstructured context of the shop to a diverse group of users, some of whom would be very unlikely to access a curriculum-based service.

Over the past ten years, PEEP has enhanced and adapted its curriculum to suit an increasing variety of delivery modes. Some of the key characteristics of these are summarised in the next table.

Table 1: A comparison of PEEP delivery modes

	Groups	Open access drop-in	Stall	Shop	Home programme
Length of session	Fixed time; 1.5 – 2 hours	Fixed time; 2 hours	Flexible time; few minutes – over an hour	Flexible time; few minutes – all day	Fixed time; 1 hour
Frequency of sessions	Once a week in term time	Once a week in term time	4 days a week 09.30 – 14.30 all year	6 days a week 09.30 – 15.00 all year	Once a week for 6 weeks though this can be flexible
Users	Regular, though do not necessarily attend every session. Generally attend all of the session	Regular, irregular or occasional – may attend all or part of the session	Users may come regularly, irregularly, occasionally or only once	Users may come regularly, irregularly, occasionally or only once	Regular
Curriculum	Progressive curriculum planned in 3 x 3 week blocks over 3 terms	Adapted curriculum planned in 3 x 3 week blocks over 3 terms	Under development	Adapted curriculum in 4 weekly blocks over 52 weeks	Flexible
Activities	Users come ‘intentionally’ so can be prepared for messy activities.	Users come ‘intentionally’ so can be prepared for messy activities.	Messy activities not permitted by Centre and not appropriate for users who use the stall in passing	Users may or may not come intentionally and may not therefore be prepared for messy activities	Participation is intentional so users can be prepared for messy activities.
Awareness of PEEP	Users know sessions are run by PEEP and based on a curriculum	Users know sessions are run by PEEP and based on a curriculum. May choose to which elements to engage with.	Different levels of awareness of PEEP and of the idea of a curriculum	Different levels of awareness of PEEP and of the idea of a curriculum	Users know sessions are run by PEEP and based on a curriculum

It is clear from this table that, even compared to the drop-in model, the shop offers distinctive challenges as well as a unique potential. Planning around the curriculum has gone through different stages as the project has progressed although the learning

outcomes from the open-access drop-in group have always been taken as a starting point. When the shop was first opened, it was intended that only one of the six distinct play areas should be linked directly to the curriculum whilst the others would be engaging play activities. The three PEEP leaders who work in the shop are knowledgeable Early Years practitioners. Two have many years of experience with PEEP while the third has worked primarily in play-groups and in specialist PEEP outreach work with young parents. They all expressed a high level familiarity with the PEEP curriculum and confidence that their different backgrounds would lead to a creative working relationship around the curriculum and its implementation. It was therefore a safe assumption that the practitioners would bring their knowledge of the PEEP curriculum into ALL the activities and that the principles of the ORIM framework would be similarly pervasive throughout the shop.

However, there has been a continuing drive to make the curriculum, which is based on delivery primarily to the adult, not the child, more explicitly documented, more clearly linked to each activity and for the planning to be done well in advance. This provides learning outcomes for each activity and clearly documented connections with an established framework. Ideally, it would allow any user to work through it systematically in order to gain an Open College Network (OCN) level 1 accreditation, as it offered in other PEEP contexts. It offers a parallel with Early Years provision for children which is required to link into either the Birth to Three Framework (DfES, 2003) or the Foundation Stage curriculum:

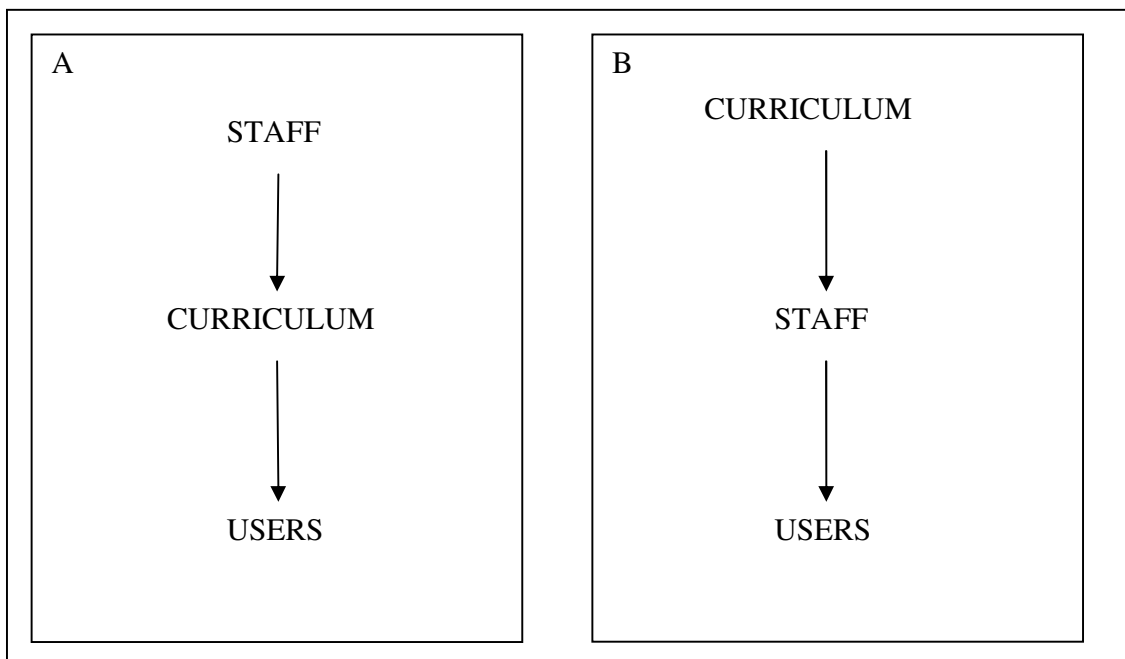
*....it is an adult to adult model around children's learning and how the parents can support that...now, the exciting thing about the shop is that you can actually explore lots of different ways of getting over that message, but nevertheless that is what the shop is about and I think we must not lose sight of that, and those lovely play activities are there to sort of speak to the parents, a model for the parents, but also the chance to just gently have interactions with the parents around...why we've got that activity, how that activity helps.....*

The curriculum, as it stands after three months of operation, is contained in appendix B. It has given rise to challenges in two particular areas. The first relates to the difficulty of translating an established curriculum from one context into another and combining the

practical knowledge and experience of practitioners into a programme, not only theoretically cohesive, but eminently ‘do-able’ of a daily basis. This has involved practical issues such as, initially, a lack of dedicated time for working on the curriculum as well as the more subtle challenge of turning, sometimes implicit, knowledge and experience into an explicit, detailed session plan.

The second relates to the paradox underlying the whole concept of the shop; that it is attempting to deliver a range of curriculum-based play and learning activities to users who may not otherwise choose to access this ‘type’ of provision. An explicit curriculum for adults could there be seen as potentially counter-productive, possibly as ‘getting in the way’ of the relationships that are being established between staff and users (A). It is therefore more constructive to view the curriculum as a tool for the practitioners in terms of supporting their facilitation of the adult/child relationship. Consequently the staff have the potential to ‘mediate’ the curriculum; exploiting its potential to the greatest effect by offering it in such a way that nobody is alienated or intimidated (B).

Table 2: Perceived relationship between staff, curriculum and users





A dilemma is the extent to which ‘making public’ the curriculum may compromise the subtle approach that the practitioners feel is necessary with some of the users. It is clear that some of the users have very different ways of interacting with their children than are encouraged by PEEP. Sometimes the very basic level at which the practitioners work with these families to encourage some very fundamental communication, may make the sophistication of the curriculum seem a little redundant.

On one occasion, an activity table had been set up with three plastic dolls in washing up bowl ‘baby baths’ which contained a small amount of water and some bubbles. There were also sponges and towels laid out. The high ratio of bubbles to water made washing the babies a lovely ‘sensual’ experience it but created much less mess than more conventional water-play. The focus of the activity was ‘routines’. The leader described the following interaction between a mother and her child:

*...we were washing the babies in little baby baths on the tables and the mum was sat on the sofa and the little girl was sat on the chair and I sat with her and we were washing the baby - this particular mum has real special needs, just lots of bad things have gone on in her life and she always sits on the sofa and wants to chat to the adult and let her daughter just play...I was sat with the daughter and I was talking to the mum about the child having her hair washed and if she had toys in the bath and stuff...then mum did come over and sort of help the little girl sit the doll up because it was laid down and she was trying to sit it up and the mum did come over and sit the doll up...and...just like showed her washing the hair and then went and sat down - so it's probably about a 15 second interaction but she did it, which she wouldn't do very often - I mean you get mums that come in who are totally 100% focused on what they're doing with their child and they'll follow their child round with each activity and do loads of stuff and they're doing it all the time, but this mum, doing that 15 seconds is like a little break-through!*

Others however, as noted in the quote above, are very much more ready to engage more directly with elements of the curriculum messages and may well welcome more ‘institutionalised’ elements such as information on the walls or work appropriately displayed under the learning outcomes for the week.

*.....there was a mum that came in yesterday, she is a child minder and she runs her own toddler group and she goes to this club and that club and this club and the other club and she was involved in doing this painting that we were doing*

*yesterday and she said “ah this is fantastic” you know, that’s the sort of stuff that she’s getting out of it and learning new things to do with a child - I mean she does all this stuff all the time playing with them - her children are her life – she is that sort of person, and so she’s getting stuff to do with the kids and she’s really enjoying it.....*

However, it has become apparent that, although many families appreciate the play activities, they are not necessarily the primary motive for their visiting the shop:

*...the sort of feedback that you get from the parents, the thing that they love about the shop and why everybody is praising it, is that they can go shopping and they can say to their child “we’ll go and play in a bit” and one mum said “I can use the toilet without having to leave the door open so I can keep an eye on my child in the buggy” ...or “I can sit down and somebody is going to make me a hot drink and you don’t know how lovely that is and if I want to sit there for ten minutes and go ‘ooh’ and have a hot drink, I know somebody is going to be playing with my child” and I know that’s not what we’re all hoping for...but once they’ve sort of done that quite often then you sort of you can encourage them and they can get up and come and play or you’re talking to the mum about what you’re doing with the child... ...so I think that for the parents, for the majority of parents, that seems to be the biggest thing, is that there is someone there to talk to, someone to support them, they’re getting ideas of how to play...but their main reason for coming isn’t “oh, that’s time for me to go and play with my child”, that’s not what they’re feeling about it...doesn’t mean it less valuable...*

At one level, all the staff are very conscious that the activities ARE the curriculum; that playdoh, for example, is never just playdoh but ‘an opportunity to explore shape’ or to ‘experience colour and texture.’ However, the practitioners are very aware that the activities must be interesting and appealing in themselves as well as practical within the context of the shop, in order for them to be popular with the children. It has been noted that the children are particularly fond of the ‘messy’ activities that they may have less access to at home as well as the more ‘unusual’ things. One leader provided the following description of an activity involving sugar, ice and paint:

*....yesterday was absolutely fantastic, it was a really quiet afternoon, I had four parents in, but those four parents had so many chairs around this table and they were all squished round and the parents were doing theirs and the children were doing theirs and the parents were saying “ooh, look what you are doing”, you know encouraging them – we were doing this...painting ice and sugar and water*

*on a piece of paper, don't know if you've ever done that, but all over and then you drip a little bit of coloured water down the paint and it blobs on and spreads out and we were doing it with the children to start off with and then one mum come over and then another and then another, we had all four mums and I think it was five children in the end all having a go at this....*

The leader felt that this was an excellent example of what the shop is trying to achieve. She cautioned however, that this type of interaction did not always take place and that there are occasions when parents sit back and allow the staff to do the playing.

The ORIM framework of Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling is seen as fundamental, not only to the curriculum but also as under-pinning the relationships in the shop. It forms part of the curriculum focus but it also provides a way for the practitioners to structure what they are offering, at every level. PEEP suggests that the framework can offer parents a way of building on what they do in everyday life but it also offers practitioners a way of thinking about their work with the adults and also a way of understanding the potential benefits of an environment where the users can 'learn' as much from the other users around them as from the practitioners.

The shop is clearly offering a wealth of undirected play activities. Each area of the shop has been well thought out and the children clearly enjoy playing with a lovely range of activities. Many of these are creative in 'typical' PEEP-style, based around everyday things found at home, but also included are things such as a train set, a dolls house, dressing up and water and sand play. However, it is also implementing a curriculum that makes explicit the opportunities within each activity to engage adults in interactions which support their understanding of the relationship between different kinds of play and children's learning and development. The ORIM framework is utilised as a guide for all interactions within the shop. The shop is clearly successful in that all these things are 'being done'.

As yet there are no directed play activities although it has been discussed that these may be introduced at some point.

All the managers and practitioners agree that the PEEP curriculum provides something distinctive to the provision. They also agree that its delivery in the context of the shop requires a new and flexible approach and that, more for some families than others, the success of this delivery will depend on the relationships that are being forged with the users.

**d) Is the shop offering information about children's services?**

The shop currently has a table close to the entrance on which are available a collection of leaflets and flyers about a range of local services. These are well used and PEEP is working with the Oxford Children's Information Service to see how the range and display of information can be improved.

**e) Conclusion**

The Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project is important. It is founded on evidence that demonstrates that, although there has been an increase in provision to support families, this provision is not always accessed by those for whom it is intended. It is an attempt to offer support by undermining the concepts most strongly associated with a formal service: it makes no attempt to recruit target families but is offered in a location where families are, not in a location where they need to go; it is in a public premises but one that feels like 'home'; it is staffed by professionals who are perceived as friends; it presents the opportunity for users to play and have fun with their children or relax with a cup of tea but all the activities are based on a curriculum and a framework that supports parents and carers in making the most of everyday life with their children and finally, it is hoping to appeal to a broad range of users and yet to nurture mutually beneficial relationships between them.

It is an innovative and exciting project and the evaluation is in place both to document the process and to comment on the successes, the challenges and to try and draw out the lessons that have been learnt along the way. The shop has only been open for three

months, far too little time to make any judgements about what its ultimate achievements will be. However, it has not been too soon to reflect on aspects of the provision that will be relevant to its on-going challenges and also for anyone wishing to implement a similar kind of provision though perhaps in a different context.

## **Section 7: Where the evaluation will go from here**

The evaluation will continue to monitor the development of the shop in the context of its aim and objectives. It has become clear however, that in many ways these are far from simple, even paradoxical and the task of the evaluation will be to unpack the issues involved.

There is no doubt that there are a small but significant proportion of “hard to reach” families using the shop who would have a high number of the ‘risk factors’ that would make them a ‘target’ for a range of services. However, it has also been noted that particularly high risk families do not get the best outcomes from interventions and may even suffer negative effects. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the subtlety of the provision offered in the context of the shop may mitigate against these negative effects. Finding some way of exploring this will be a challenge. It will also be very interesting to note whether the shop continues to attract additional families with quite such high needs or if that is a ‘niche’ in the shop that only a certain number of families can fill.

Collecting any more detailed data from the users was not considered desirable at this early stage in the project. Having agreed that one aspect of being “hard to reach” is an unwillingness to access any statutory provision, it was felt that the ‘rituals’ of asking for information, such as has become associated with Sure Start services, were best avoided. It would also be antithetical to the homely atmosphere that is distinctive about the shop. Additionally, it was felt that basic demographic data could not really illuminate whether or not a family was benefiting from the services provided in the shop. Nevertheless, as the shop becomes established, it is anticipated that data could be collected some time in the future, perhaps by sampling over a one week period. This would supplement the

anecdotal evidence collected so far. Developing an interview schedule for users will also be an objective of the next phase of the evaluation.

It is clear that the stall had a significant impact on the early success of the shop. It may well happen that the stall is run periodically in the concourse. If it is re-established, it would be interesting to take careful note of its impact on numbers of new users in the shop. Perhaps the monitoring suggested above could be timed to capture a 'pre-stall' and a 'stall' week.

Possibly the greatest challenge faced by the project is that of implementing a structured, developmental curriculum within the context of the shop and to families who could easily be alienated by any formal educational/institutional atmosphere. PEEP is aware of this tension and both the curriculum and the nature of its delivery have been the subject of much on-going discussion over the past three months. The next phase of the evaluation will provide an opportunity to look in more depth at the implementation of the curriculum as it has had chance to bed-down. It will seek to explore its effectiveness in different areas, by investigating the curriculum, not in terms of what it is offering, but in terms of what the users, both adults and children, are getting from it. It may also be fruitful to look more closely at aspects of the ORIM framework and the relationship between its different components and the curriculum.

There is, justifiably, a real sense of achievement from the staff involved in the project that, despite a few 'teething troubles', the shop has begun very much as it was hoped. The practitioners bring a huge amount of enthusiasm and commitment to their work which they clearly enjoy and they have had the satisfaction of receiving very positive and appreciative feedback from the users:

*....I'm feeling really pleased with how things are going in the shop as far as regular parents and...parents are coming in regular...and we've made some really good...not like social friendships, but where you know them...you know their background, you know a lot of their history and they say they love coming just to talk and to off-load all the 'stuff' that's going on in their lives ...it's pushing a lot of the buttons that I'd hoped it would do – a lot of the activities that we've been doing are really good - stuff that's quite available at home, you know*

*using not all bought stuff - the shop is lovely...it's really nice, welcoming and relaxing which is something that comes across from a lot of people that come in there...all the sort of things - working in the shop...the staff working in the shop, the parents coming in, what we're playing, how things are going with parents – it's all really good.....*

It has been a promising beginning. The next phases of the evaluation will seek ways to explore if and how the shop is able to not only affirm parents and carers as they are, but to support them in realising some or all of the aims of the PEEP programme itself.

Thus, is it:

- Promoting parents' and carers' awareness of children's early learning development?
- Supporting parents/carers in their relationship with their children in such a way that the children's self-esteem and learning dispositions are enhanced?
- Affirming parents/carers as their child's first educators?
- Supporting parents/carers in the development of their children's literacy and numeracy?
- Promoting and supporting the life-long learning of parents and carers?

Finding the answers to these questions will, over the duration of the project, allow a realistic assessment of whether the shop really is a 'drop-in with a difference'.

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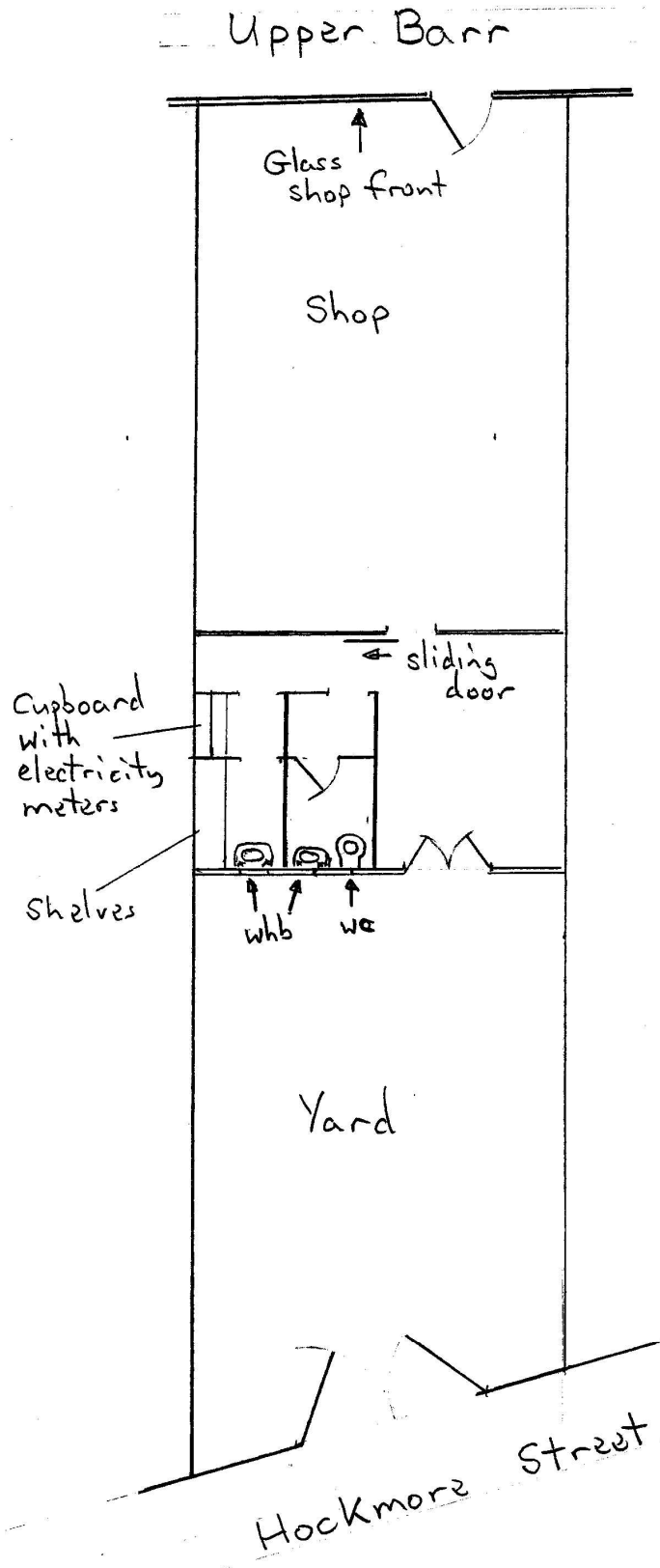
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## **Appendix A**



Floor plan of the shop



31 UPPER BARR  
TEMPLARS SQUARE  
COWLEY, OXFORD

## Appendix B: Templars Square Shopping Centre: PEEP Curriculum Schedule

<b>Summer 2006</b>		
<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>OCN learning outcome/weekly focus</b>	
	<b>Know how adults can help babies' and young children's later reading and writing skills through play and everyday life</b>	
18 April	Opportunities for mark-making	
24 April	Valuing mark-making	
2 May Bank holiday 1 May	Talking about pictures	
8 May	Extending stories	
	<b>Know why developing a sense of order helps babies and young children feel secure, and how routines can help</b>	
15 May		
22 May		
29 May Bank holiday 29 May School holiday	<b>Spring activities</b>	
5 June	<b>Spring activities</b>	
12 June		
19 June		
	<b>Know the importance of listening to babies and young children and how adults can help</b>	
26 June		
3 July		
10 July		
17 July		
24 July School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	
31 July School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	
7 August School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	
14 August School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	
21 August School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	
28 August Bank holiday 28 August School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>	

## Templars Square Shopping Centre

<b>Autumn 2006</b>		
<b>Week beginning</b>		<b>OCN learning outcome/weekly focus</b>
		<b>Know how adults can use the ORIM framework to support babies' and young children's learning</b>
4 <sup>th</sup> September	School starts 5 <sup>th</sup>	Opportunities
11 <sup>th</sup> September		Recognition
18 <sup>th</sup> September		Interaction
25 <sup>th</sup> September		Modelling
		<b>Know how to make the most of talking with babies and young children</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> October		
9 <sup>th</sup> October		
16 <sup>th</sup> October		
23 <sup>rd</sup> October	School holiday	<b>Autumn activities</b>
30 <sup>th</sup> October		<b>Autumn activities</b>
6 <sup>th</sup> November		
		<b>Know how to provide play opportunities which help babies and young children's learning</b>
13 <sup>th</sup> November		
20 <sup>th</sup> November		
27 <sup>th</sup> November		
4 <sup>th</sup> December		
11 <sup>th</sup> December		<b>Winter activities</b>
18 <sup>th</sup> December	School holiday	<b>Winter activities</b>
25 <sup>th</sup> December	School holiday	Closed

## Templars Square Shopping Centre

<b>Spring 2007</b>	
<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>OCN learning outcome/weekly focus</b>
	<b>Know how positive relationships help babies and children feel good about themselves</b>
1st January Bank holiday 1 <sup>st</sup> January School starts 4 <sup>th</sup> January	
8 <sup>th</sup> January	
15 <sup>th</sup> January	
22 <sup>nd</sup> January	
	<b>Know that using everyday numbers with babies and young children helps their learning</b>
29 <sup>th</sup> January	
5 <sup>th</sup> February	
12 <sup>th</sup> February School holiday	<b>Winter activities</b>
19 <sup>th</sup> February	
26 <sup>th</sup> February	
	<b>Know how babies and young children make sense of their world through exploring and making choices</b>
5 <sup>th</sup> March	
12 <sup>th</sup> March	
19 <sup>th</sup> March	
26 <sup>th</sup> March	
2 <sup>nd</sup> April School holiday	<b>Spring activities</b>
9 <sup>th</sup> April School holiday	<b>Spring activities</b>

## Templars Square Shopping Centre

<b>Summer 2007</b>		
<b>Week beginning</b>		<b>OCN learning outcome/weekly focus</b>
		<b>Know how adults can help babies' and young children's later reading and writing skills through play and everyday life</b>
16 <sup>th</sup> April		Opportunities for mark-making
23 <sup>rd</sup> April		Valuing mark-making
30 <sup>th</sup> April		Talking about pictures
7 <sup>th</sup> May	Bank holiday 7 <sup>th</sup> May	Extending stories
		<b>Know why developing a sense of order helps babies and young children feel secure, and how routines can help</b>
14 <sup>th</sup> May		
21 <sup>st</sup> May		
28 <sup>th</sup> May	School holiday	<b>Spring activities</b>
4 <sup>th</sup> June		<b>Spring activities</b>
11 <sup>th</sup> June		
18 <sup>th</sup> June		
		<b>Know the importance of listening to babies and young children and how adults can help</b>
25 <sup>th</sup> June		
2 <sup>nd</sup> July		
9 <sup>th</sup> July		
16 <sup>th</sup> July		
23 <sup>rd</sup> July	School holiday begins 26 <sup>th</sup> July	<b>Summer activities</b>
30 <sup>th</sup> July	School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>
6 <sup>th</sup> August	School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>
13 <sup>th</sup> August	School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>
20 <sup>th</sup> August	School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>
27 <sup>th</sup> August	Bank holiday 27 <sup>th</sup> August School holiday	<b>Summer activities</b>