

# charlotte atkins MP writes

I WOULD like to take this opportunity to congratulate Sure Start Staffordshire Moorlands for winning a national Childcare Champions Award for its Special Matters Project. Significantly, Special Matters is the only winner for a group, not individuals. The award was presented by Treasury Minister Ed Balls, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown's right-hand man, on behalf of the Chancellor at No 11 Downing Street. I have invited Ed Balls to come and see the project for himself. Special Matters is a unique combination of local parents of children with special needs, who meet to help steer professionals to provide a quality comprehensive service for those families who have children with special needs. The Special Matters project was set up initially to offer support to the families in the Sure Start area who felt unsupported and lacking information on services, but quickly was extended to other families. The very nature of our rural area often makes it hard to reach families, and this is even more so for families with children with special needs. The project has gone some way to address this through peer support and positive action. It is, by its

very nature, an inclusive group, which addresses diversity and equal opportunities. Guided by the families in the group, it has provided activity days which cater for the whole family. These days provide a rare opportunity for Special Matters families to relax, enjoy a day out together and try an activity they might not otherwise have accessed. Again, these days are inclusive, and activities are suitable or adapted to give access to all. Breakfast clubs, support group meetings and action groups are also open to all, and where possible, crèche facilities are offered. All the activities, meetings and groups are targeted towards the whole family – mothers, fathers, carers, special needs children, their siblings and all cultural groups. This is the Labour Government's innovative pre-school child project, Sure Start, working at its best – parent-led and focused on the needs of the whole family – and demonstrates how marvellous the programme has been countrywide. Sure Start provides the best possible start in life for 0 to four-year-olds, with breakfast clubs, toy libraries, play facilities, health checks and a whole range of activities which

bring children and their mums together in a supportive and caring environment. It benefits not only the children, but mums too – some take up the opportunity to improve their own learning, boosting confidence and helping them prepare their own youngsters for school. I won the money from the Government for the Staffordshire Moorlands Sure Start after putting down a series of Parliamentary Questions asking about how many Sure Starts there were in rural areas. The answer was, basically, not many – so it was agreed I should have one in my constituency.

