

# Hundreds in Manchester protest closure of Sure Start

**Our reporters**  
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Hundreds of parents and their children demonstrated outside Manchester Town Hall in north west England on Saturday, to protest plans to close or privatise all the city's 36 Sure Start children's centres.

The facilities, which provide free or cheap facilities and services for young children and their parents, are threatened as part of cuts of £109 million in the Labour Party-run Manchester City Council's budget. Children's services, including Sure Start, are to be cut by 26 percent, or £45.1 million. Youth centres provision is also being slashed and is to be taken over by voluntary groups under council plans.

The cuts to Sure Start are being imposed alongside the loss of 2,000 job losses—17 percent of its workforce. Also to close are five of the city's libraries in Clayton, Miles Platting, East City in Openshaw, Rackhouse in Wythenshawe and Barlow Moor in Chorlton.

Two swimming pools at Levenshulme and Miles Platting are also set to close. Other services threatened include the Arcadia, Ardwick and Ten Acres leisure centres and the Debdale Sailing Centre.

Further cutbacks are being made, including in the refuse collection budget. General waste collection is to be collected fortnightly, rather than weekly, and streets will no longer be cleaned overnight. Other cuts include the ending of free car parking on Sundays. On-street charging times are to be extended to 12 hours between from 0700 to 1900.

Among the speakers at the protest was Manchester City Council leader, Sir Richard Leese, leader of Manchester City Council, who claimed that the ruling Labour Party supported the provision of Sure Start, even as it imposed the cuts! In reality, the favoured option of the council is their privatisation. Leese stated, "We are committed to keeping them going until we find those other providers."

Also speaking was Graham Stringer, a Labour Party Member of Parliament for Manchester Blackley and Broughton. Stringer stated that the council "was doing its very best in the most difficult of circumstances" and absurdly claimed that the city council was opposed to the government's austerity programme.

A Manchester City Council spokesman said earlier this month that the council had already implemented £55 million in efficiency savings over the past two years, and it was planning to make a further £96 million over the coming two years.

Danielle Hughes is a parent from the Cheetham Hill area of the city. Her son, Mason, uses the Boxgrove Walk Sure Start centre. She said, "My son loves it. He has really advanced going there. He was moved up three months to the next class as he was more advanced than the class he was in. If it shuts down in September, he will have to wait until he is three to get into another school.

"There's been a school there for over 30 years. It's always been a children's centre. I can get help with anything there. If I wanted to go to college at a different time, they would make arrangements for Mason to go to Sure Start at a different time. So if that gets shut, I can't get a college course in order to get a job, which is what the government is telling us to do.

"I don't agree with these cuts. They shouldn't be attacking the children."

Angela Chan, a teaching assistant, said, "My first child was at Boxgrove and started at two years old until three and a half years old. She benefited a lot from it. So I trusted Boxgrove with my second child, Emily. As soon as she was born, I put her name down to go to Boxgrove.

"This has enabled me to go to college and change my career and study to be a teacher. If Boxgrove wasn't there, I wouldn't have been able to do that. If it closes, a lot of young parents are going to suffer. They often don't know what to do. So they have these classes at Sure Start for breastfeeding, they have parent/child classes for reading. They have fun, and they give out so much advice.

"They should leave the children alone and get the money from elsewhere. I strongly disagree with these cuts. The money has to come from those who can afford it, the rich people. To save Boxgrove, a lot of local people, our community, have just got together. There are over 100 people using Boxgrove every day."

Nuria, who is a vet, said, “I live in the centre of Manchester, but use the Winstanley Sure Start in Miles Platting. It’s a very deprived area. Both of my children are using the centre and have been going for a year and a half.

“We got them in Winstanley as it’s the only centre that opens early enough for us to be able to work. We got them there through the working family services. If this centre closes, it will be really scary. It will mean that I will have to stop working.

“I think these cuts are an experiment. It has taken years to build up these services like Sure Start centres, and in a matter of days they want to destroy everything. It would take years to build up these things again. They are also talking about the libraries closing down. I think the cuts are completely unfair. You can’t blame us for what has happened to the economy, but we are the ones who are being asked to pay for it.”

Dianne said, “I’m here supporting Sure Starts as it help with everything, including helping the parents get to college so they could get back to work.

“One of the main things is that if you have nowhere to put your kids while you work, you are going to have to give up your job.”

Sarah’s local Sure Start is Ashbury Meadow. She said, “We have seen in the paper about child poverty and that Manchester is top of the table. Sure Start is accessible to a parent for free. In Beswick, child poverty is very, very high. We just know that from living there all our lives. We know neighbours who are living on the breadline. And if you are fortunate enough to work, you are still not made of money. You still need services that are cheap, or free. You don’t have money to spend every week to enrich your children’s life, and Sure Start does that for you.

“Sure Start begins for kids at birth and carries on for children and families. I am 39 and I use Sure Start. How can you privatise it? Private companies don’t do anything for no profit.

“When David Cameron was standing to be elected, he said he wouldn’t touch Sure Start. From someone whose children have had silver spoons and don’t need a Sure Start, and for someone who spouted how well the National Health Service treated his child, who unfortunately died, he hasn’t done either any favours, has he?

“Manchester City Council is making 2,000 people unemployed, and this is a bad thing. So, not only are 2,000 losing their jobs, they are also losing a service they will need now more than ever.

“I remember in 1980 when we lost lots of children’s services. We lost lots of playgrounds and other services like youth clubs. And it was proven by the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s that the children suffered.

“I think certain services should be ring-fenced. They shouldn’t be cut. Look at the bankers with the head of Royal Bank of Scotland receiving a £2 million bonus. Lending people money has not increased, people being able to get mortgages has not increased, so they are not helping the economy, are they? So why is he getting a bonus? The government has rolled over for the bankers.”

Dianne added, “The bankers should get paid a wage like the rest of us. They just scribble on bits of paper, saying who gets a loan, and it’s us that have to pay the loans back. Why doesn’t the government say to the banks, ‘You pay us back what you owe us’? Why are we the ones who have to pay for all this?”

A Sure Start worker said closures “would be a massive blow to those families that were dependent on these services, who were some of the most disadvantaged in Manchester. This service has been going for a long time, and there was a level of expertise developed and a diversity of services.”

One worker was campaigning on behalf of “Access to advice”, a pressure group to stop the cutting of Manchester Advice, a free city council advice service.

She said, “It’s the government’s proposal to cut Legal Aid. The cost of Manchester Advice is £1.7 million a year. The council want to cut this service, which last year advised 80,000 Manchester residents and saved around £30 million in terms of mortgage repossessions, debt, and state benefit appeals for those it advised. Last year, the service kept 800 families in their homes.”

If advice service is cut, there will be no personal representation for people wishing to appeal against benefit cuts at tribunals, as the Citizens Advice Bureau is no longer funded to provide that service. Those who are unfairly dismissed at work or are harassed by their landlord will also be affected.

“With the massive cuts in employment, disability and housing benefits, this will push more people into poverty,” she added. “If they get rid of Manchester Advice, people will have nowhere else to go. We have clients that are being told that we can’t represent them because the service is due for closure under the budget proposals. They are in tears, and we are in tears because we want to help people and it’s being taken out of our hands.”



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