

UK: Parents and staff demonstrate against closure of Sheffield children's centres

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Hundreds of childcare workers, parents and their children marched through central Sheffield Saturday against the Labour-led council's "reorganisation" of the city's 36 Sure Start Children's Centres.

The centres provide early intervention services for children and families struggling financially and emotionally in raising children with a myriad of needs.

The plans are part of £50 million in savings due to be finalised in March for the 2013-2014 budget. This is in addition to the £140 million already cut in the past two years. Cuts include the closure and demolition of Don Valley Stadium, 14 of the city's 27 libraries and a 25 percent cut for museums and the arts.

Saturday also saw several hundred people protest in the town of Stocksbridge, in Sheffield, against the closure of the local leisure centre.

The cuts are a part of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's austerity measures, but Labour is once again faithfully imposing this agenda in local government.

Up to 19 of the city's 36 Sure Start centres are to close, with the loss of up to 150 fully trained staff. The aim is to have 17 children's centre "areas", with each area having only one nursery. The council has thus far refused to name which centres will close. The cuts will lead to a loss of up to 150 fully trained staff, nursery places for children with disabilities, advice work and in-home support. Many mothers rely on Children's Centres to be able to go to work.

It is predicted that every council in England will have to close at least one Sure Start Children's Centre because of funding cuts. Children's Centres were established as an extension of the former Labour government's Sure Start programmes as part of its pledge to end child poverty. It was a move designed to temporarily conceal the impact of the winding down of

state provision of welfare services and to strengthen the hand of the private sector. But for this very reason, tens of thousands of families became reliant on them.

There are some 3,500 Children's Centres, providing services for over 650,000 pre-school children in nearly a third of the most disadvantaged areas across the country. They deliver support for children's health, including services such as reducing smoking in pregnancy, increasing breastfeeding rates, improving diet and nutrition, and reducing levels of child obesity and teenage pregnancies.

Sheffield has the highest number of Children's Centre closures announced so far, but dozens more are to follow. In Stoke-on-Trent (Labour), seven out of 16 Children's Centres are threatened as the council attempts to cut £12.6 million from its children's services budget. Hammersmith and Fulham (Conservative) have proposed ending the funding for 9 out of its 15 centres. It is also planning to merge its children's services with two neighbouring boroughs. Westminster (Conservative) is cutting £5.4 million from its children's services budget. Oxfordshire County Council (Conservative) has announced that 14 Children's Centres that were to be built are not going ahead.

Norfolk County Council (Conservative) is planning to "reconfigure" its network of Children's Centres, with some of its rural centres likely to merge. Kirklees Council (Labour) is looking at revised models of working for its Children's Centres, alongside other council services.

Maureen Nuttall, of Action For Children, said the prediction that at least one would close in every area was conservative. Action For Children was already working with local authorities on restructuring 150 centres.

While Labour is passing on the coalition's cuts, the trade unions are attempting to wind down opposition. The GMB trade union has called meekly for a postponement in funding cuts, arguing that this would allow it to "assess" the government's revised spending plans. As the leaflet distributed by the Socialist Equality Party at the protest explained, this is nothing more than "Opposition in words. Collaboration in deeds."

The WSWS spoke to some of those on the march.

Lesley Burkinshaw is an Early Years Practitioner at Manor Children's Centre (CC):

"If these centres close, they are depriving children from having the best start they can have in life socially and emotionally and everything else. We have got to stop the domino effect, and we have got to intervene to change this. They are taking the money off people who need it the most.

"Our centre is in one of the most deprived areas of Sheffield. We run parenting classes, work with MaTReC [Manor Training & Resource Centre], which run training courses for adults and provide a free crèche. Midwives and health visitors use the CC. We run toddler groups and support families from pregnancy to school.

"There are 24 in our team who are qualified, experienced people who have worked there from day one and are going to lose their jobs."

Lisa Caddick, who also works at the Manor CC, said, "The services they are proposing to cut will affect the community as a whole.... These vulnerable areas are desperate for funding. The government says they want to get families back to work, but they're giving them no support and incentive to do so."

Jen said, "I am a parent currently on a training course in Sign Language at MaTReC. If the Children's Centre closes, I will not be able to attend my training.

"Parents are being forced into work whether you are a couple or a lone parent. If that centre closes, we are up the creek without a paddle, as there are not enough crèche places at the college. It has a knock-on effect—with no child care, it gives them the excuse to shut courses.

"I think the whole thing is planned so that they've got a wealth of people who can do low-end, low-paid jobs. They want to force them into these jobs by the threat of cutting benefits. By axing the Children's

Centres, they are actively preventing people getting out of their situations.

"If they weren't spending so much money on a war in Afghanistan, there would be money for these things. It's profits before people every time."

Crystal works at Ellesmere CC. She said, "The cuts mean that a lot of our families will have no access to childcare. Where are they going to go? The area where our CC is based has families from all over the world. What are working parents going to do?

"Why not take the money from the banks or policing? We're not getting the pay that the bankers are. They are taking the money from us who are trying to help our communities. A lot of the work we do is from the goodness of our hearts, and it's going to affect us and particularly bilingual families."

Liz Bowman supports adults without qualifications who rely on the Children's Centres to attend classes: "A lot of the EAL and ESOL [English as a second language] learners are going to lose out from these closures. They are making it harder to return to work and get training and qualifications.

"The unions are all about compromise and have lost what they were intended for. I will fight for everybody like the teaching assistants who are on a minimum wage."



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