

Saved: Manchester's Sure Start centres to stay open after massive protest by parents ^[1]

Author: Linton, Deborah

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EXCERPTS:

Sure Start centres in Manchester will stay open under town hall plans to save them from the axe.

The council had said huge government funding cuts would force the closure of all the city's 39 Sure Starts if new groups could not be found to take them on. That announcement, a year ago, sparked a massive backlash by parents.

Now we can reveal children's services chiefs have drawn up proposals to keep the centres open.

But the cuts - of 21 per cent of the council's government grant - mean plans to end council-run daycare for under-fives will go ahead. Instead, there will be an outreach programme that will see every family of a newborn visited at home by a council worker, who will stay in touch until the child is three.

The battling army of mums and dads who didn't give up the fight to save Sure Start centres.

The plan to save Sure Starts, which provide childcare and parenting advice to some of Manchester's poorest families, follows a three-month public consultation - the biggest the children services department has ever undertaken. Face-to-face meetings were held with 8,200 parents and carers and 4,700 people responded to questionnaires.

The city's early years budget is being slashed by £22.1m, with the loss of 400 jobs, as part of £170m of council cuts.

Coun Afzal Khan, the town hall's executive member for children's services, said the council was 'determined to continue to improve provisions for under-fives across the city' and would 'move fairly and progressively forward'.

He added: "We anticipated most of the issues that would be raised by parents during our consultation, and have listened closely to the concerns of the many parents and others who have responded to it.

"The proposals that we have drawn up will see far more families accessing Sure Start services than at present, which in turn should result in far better outcomes for children and families across the city."

The council will maintain all core Sure Start provision at 39 centres - including health and parenting advice, breastfeeding support and early learning.

But some of the extra, discretionary services will be lost.

The £3m cost of keeping the provision going will be met by moving other services - such as Jobcentre Plus, youth and midwifery services - into Sure Start buildings, allowing the council to close other sites.

The buildings will be open for longer, with space rented out to community groups.

The council will also save £11m by pulling out of providing universal daycare for under-fives, affecting 800 youngsters who use heavily-subsidised local authority provision across 24 locations, including nine council nurseries.

Those youngsters make up about 2.5 per cent of Manchester's 32,500 under-sixes - but are more than one in ten of those in daycare in the city.

The daycare plan was first proposed in September and will move forward, despite opposition from two-thirds of people who responded to consultation.

Parents affected face a rise of between £11 and £37 a week in private daycare costs.

But the council is promising additional help for lowest-income families, who could find themselves better off out-of-work because of the changes.

Bosses are planning to pull out of daycare over the next two years. They say they will not withdraw from an area until an affordable, high-quality alternative is in place. Where that cannot be found, they will continue to act as 'provider of last resort'.

Mike Livingstone, director of children's services, said: "Our analysis shows there is already enough good quality and affordable daycare

provision being provided by the private, voluntary and independent sector, so over time we will no longer need to provide it ourselves."
-reprinted from the Manchester Evening News

Region: Europe ^[2]

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