

Sure Start, Uncertain Future

Number of council-run children's centres has plummeted since 2010/11

More than a third (38%) of council-run children's centres have been closed across England since 2010, with the situation set to worsen for parents and staff as town halls struggle to avoid bankruptcy, according to new research by UNISON.

Freedom of Information (Fol) requests have revealed that at least 3,106 council-run children's centres were open across England in 2010/2011. However, UNISON has found that at least 1,168 centres have since closed, casualties of the government's relentless austerity measures.

Cash-strapped local authorities in the South East have borne the brunt, shutting a staggering 68% of council-run children's centres between 2010/11 and 2022/23. In the West Midlands, local authorities closed 59% of their sites.

Alarming, councils' latest Fol disclosures do not cover further proposed cuts to children and family services – including early help centres – due over the next two years at struggling authorities such as Birmingham and Derbyshire. This raises serious concerns about councils' capacity to address growing early-years inequalities and prepare children for school.

A separate and detailed survey conducted by UNISON among children's services staff revealed that 70% of respondents work at an authority that has closed a children's centre over the period since 2010.

Staff have described the devastating impact on children and parents due to cuts to these vital, community-based early-years services. Overwhelmed parents of newborns in deprived or isolated areas are left with minimal access to professional advice, including from health or care staff, at a time when they need support the most.

Overworked council staff report a surge in health and mental health issues among parents and children. They also point to child learning and speech difficulties due to inadequate access to educational support, as well as soaring referrals to social services because problems are not being detected early enough. There are also increased costs for parents who are forced to travel further for help and a worrying lack of preparedness for school among young children.

Background

Council-run children's centres existed across England decades before the creation of Sure Start in 1998 – often as nursery schools, child development centres or family centres. Services varied by locality, but included: day nurseries offering working parents full-time childcare for children aged 0-5 years; community-based playgroups; nursery schools and classes for children aged 3-5; child development centres for youngsters with special educational needs and disabilities; and family centres to help those facing health issues, isolation, poverty and other challenges.

These services, and the trained staff who worked there, were seen as essential in supporting early childhood development. But provision across the UK was inconsistent. In 1998, the UK government introduced Sure Start, which aimed to create a more cohesive network of children's centres that integrated education, childcare, health and family support.

Sure Start – aimed at children aged 0-4 years – was universally accessible and targeted, especially in disadvantaged areas, to ensure access to high-quality early-years support. The policy was popular and by 2010 there were at least 3,106 council-run children's centres across England.

But deep budget cuts from 2010/11 combined with new powers for councils to allocate scarce resources led town halls to slash the number of children's centres they managed. Many councils replaced Sure Start with family hubs offering a wider range of services to a broader children's age group. But more than a decade of enforced austerity has eroded local provision. Subsequent cuts have fallen disproportionately on disadvantaged areas and the very families Sure Start was designed to assist.

Further closures of family hub and early help centres risk the continued loss of key community services such as health visitors, speech and language development, healthy-eating programmes, parenting, school readiness and other types of family support.

How UNISON's data was compiled

UNISON is the largest union in local government, representing more than 300,000 workers at councils and schools across the UK.

The union sent freedom of information requests to 152 councils across England – including London boroughs, counties, unitary authorities and metropolitan councils. The data is based on two key questions:

- How many council-run children's centres were open in each area in 2010/11?
- How many council-run children's centres were closed in each area between 2010/11 and 2022/23?

The union received responses from 139 councils across England. However, these included responses from the four councils that had emerged following local government reorganisations across Cumbria and Northamptonshire. To provide data consistent with the list of councils operating in 2010/11, UNISON has combined responses from reorganised councils – leaving a total of 137 council areas that provided data covering 2010/11 to 2022/23.

Only partial data was provided by 13 councils on the number of children's centres open in 2010/11. Consequently, they have been removed from the analysis.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were not covered by the FoI requests.

Separately, UNISON undertook a qualitative survey of 177 children's services staff.

Key findings from UNISON's Freedom of Information requests

- More than a third (38%) of council-run children's centres have closed across England since 2010/11.
- At least 3,106 council-run children's centres were open across England in 2010/11. But councils have disclosed that 1,168 centres have since closed.
- Councils in the South East (68%) and West Midlands (59%) closed the highest proportion of their council-run children's centres between 2010/11 and 2022/23.
- Local authorities across the South East closed the most sites (258), followed by the East of England (192), London (174), West Midlands (161) and the North West (109).
- Councils across Yorkshire & Humberside closed the lowest proportion (18%) of council-run children's centres, followed by the South West (21%).
- Local authorities in the North East closed the fewest number of children's centres (54), followed by the South West (65) and Yorkshire & Humberside (66).
- UNISON found that 46 local authorities closed at least half of their council-run children's centres over the period. Just 33 councils reported no closures.
- Unsurprisingly given their size, three county councils topped the list of local authorities that had closed the most council-run children's centres. These were Essex (74), Hampshire (70) and Surrey (39).
- Across city, unitary, metropolitan and borough councils, Birmingham (38) closed the most sites. This was followed by Shropshire (23), Somerset (20), Sandwell (20) and Stockport (17).
- Local authorities that did not close any council-run children's centres between 2010/11 and 2022/23 included Lincolnshire, Bedford, Greenwich, Hackney and Liverpool.

Headline findings from staff testimonies

UNISON also undertook a qualitative survey of 139 local government staff, including many who work in children's centres or services. This revealed that 70% work at a council that has closed at least one children's centre.

Council staff who responded to the survey routinely warned the decision to close Sure Start centres, and now many family hubs and early years services, has had a devastating impact on children, parents and workers.

Staff have witnessed a widening gap between the haves and have-nots during the cost-of-living crisis, with many reporting parents and children in disadvantaged and isolated (including rural) communities have been disproportionately affected by cuts forced upon councils by austerity.

The impact has been witnessed first-hand by staff working across children's centre services – from health visitors and children's services staff to those offering nursery support, help for children with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as welfare support.

Here are a selection of responses:

“The closure and scaling back of services have had a huge impact on children and families. Community support and resources are limited, and there has also been an increase in mental health issues. We’re seeing older children needing support and reception-age pupils with speech and language delays, and issues with toilet training.”

“Some closures have removed the only resources in isolated communities, limiting the ability of families to access support.”

“There are a higher number of referrals to children's services, as families no longer have the weekly contact with others that they need to manage day-to-day parenting.”

“Services have been consolidated so the whole of North Yorkshire only has three children’s resource centres. Some parents are waiting years to get support.”

“A centre near me, specialising in supporting children with additional needs, was closed. These vulnerable children now face long waiting lists to access vital support.”

“It's not a local service anymore. Families have to travel. Those who cannot afford the travel costs now miss out. Vulnerable households are being missed.”

“Children are not being seen, which is a safeguarding concern. They’re missing developmental milestones. The attainment gap is widening and those most disadvantaged are falling even further behind. Parents can’t access support and their mental health is suffering. Family finances are under pressure and they’re unable to cope.”

“Staff have lost their jobs and had to move to different areas. Families have lost their local centre where they know the staff. Children have lost their familiar routine, familiar carers and their friends.”

“Parents within West Wirral have found the closure of centres devastating because they heavily relied upon them with their first child. When it has come to second children, parents have found the child has not had the same positive early start as their older sibling. Families feel like they’ve been forgotten.”

“I am a family support worker. I visit a family where the mum can't manage one of her disabled children on her own because she also has a disability. If it wasn't for our team, the child would go into full-time care.”

“The closures have been devastating. Sure Start was started on research around the positive development needed from 0-3 years of age. This will affect future generations.”

Conclusions – what needs to happen next?

Children's centres are the lifeblood of communities, providing essential services that support early childhood development, and offer much-needed respite and assistance to working parents.

The closure of these centres is not just a number. Each represents a significant loss of support for all parents and severe disruption to developmental opportunities for young children. While children's services centres have closed across all areas, the fallout has been acutely felt across disadvantaged communities with a heavy reliance on these services for affordable childcare, early education, and health and social services.

For the dedicated staff working in these centres, closures have meant job losses, increased job insecurity and a dilution of the crucial support they provide.

UNISON is calling for families to have access to children's centres in every community. Council finances are under huge pressure due to government underfunding since 2010.

UNISON believes local authorities need decent funding based on multi-year, long-term settlements to allow councils and staff to properly plan and deliver the services their communities need.

Cuts since 2010 have left vast areas without any council-run facilities. UNISON believes that ensuring every neighbourhood has a children's centre will help deliver improvements in health and education and boost the well-being of the next generation. While every neighbourhood deserves this investment and access to a children's centre should be universal, funding initially needs to be targeted at the areas of greatest social and economic disadvantage.

Children's centres must be well-resourced and staffed by multi-disciplinary teams of professionals who can support parents, carers, babies and young children. This means making sure there is a workforce strategy focused on resourcing and training the community mentors of tomorrow.

June 2024