



**Labour** Friends  
of **Sure Start**

## **Sure Start, Sure Future**



## **Reflections on the future of Sure Start**

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## **Sure Start, Sure Future**

### **Contents**

Page 2. Contents

Page 3. Stephen Twigg MP: Foreword

Page 4. Michael Pavey: Introduction

Page 9. Polly Toynbee: Sure Start, one of Labour's most permanently transformative successes

Page 12. Fiona Millar: The Vision has become blurred

Page 15. Cllr. Catherine West: There can be no better investment in our society

Page 17. Melissa Benn: In defence of universalism

Page 20. Graham Allen MP: The Future of Sure Start: a hub for Early Intervention

Page 23. Ben Thomas: Defend Sure Start

Page 25. Claire McCarthy: Sure Start Children's Centres, a bright future despite the gloom

Page 28. Alex Mirza: A unique way of providing a lifeline

Page 32. Jill Rutter: Keep Sure Start Nurseries Open!

Page 34. Charlotte Brady: Why I love Sure Start

Page 37. Sharon Hodgson MP: Sure Start should be at the centre of One Nation Britain

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## **Foreword: Stephen Twigg MP**

**Stephen Twigg MP is the Shadow Secretary of State for Education.**



Britain faces some huge challenges. Not least the challenge of building a recovery so that we have an economy that works for working people. That means supporting people into work and helping them to stay in work.

I am proud of the transformational changes that we made in government. Sure Start was one of the best things we did. But dismantling Sure Start as the Tory-led government is doing will take Britain backward and undermine our pursuit of full employment.

Sure Start has been important for employment. But there is so much more to the Sure Start programme that we set up. It was about targeting support for the hardest to reach families; about bringing communities together; and about giving children - irrespective of their social background - the best start in life.

These measures are as important today as they ever have been.

Not according to David Cameron and Nick Clegg. Under them - despite their pledges to retain Sure Start - we have 500 fewer Sure Start centres across the country and a 40% reduction in early intervention funding. In addition, they have created a triple whammy for parents in childcare - with rising costs, fewer places and less support.

In Opposition, as in Government, we remain committed to Sure Start's founding principles. I pay tribute to the Sure Start and Early Years workforce transforming lives across the country. In Sharon Hodgson, Labour's Shadow Minister for Children and Families, you have a true champion.

Thank you for the work of Labour Friends for Sure Start. It was a privilege to speak at the launch event and I look forward to working with you as we build towards 2015 and the next Labour Government.

## **Introduction: Michael Pavey**

**Michael Pavey is Director of Labour Friends of Sure Start and Lead Member for Children & Families at Brent Council.**



Sure Start is Labour's greatest achievement since Attlee. It is an utterly unqualified success story and an historic achievement.

Until 1997 Britain had a miserable record in both Early Years investment and Early Intervention. Sure Start was the flagship in a programme of initiatives which turned the tide of neglect. It was an act of social reform and political courage comparable with the founding of the NHS.

But whereas for decades the Conservative Party were terrified to make a full frontal assault on the NHS, they have got stuck into Sure Start immediately.

Over 500 Sure Start Centres have closed since 2010, budgets have been cut by 40% and more than a fifth of Sure Start workers have lost their jobs. But as the Conservatives reveal their childcare plans, it is clear that much bigger problems lie ahead.

The Conservatives have rejected the founding principle of Sure Start: that childcare and family support are inseparable partners in effective Early Years development.

Instead, the Tories have recast the Early Years in solely utilitarian, economic terms: childcare is little more than a route to parental employment. We are currently seeing a dangerous deregulation of the childcare sector in pursuit of this Tory goal. The logical culmination will be baby-warehouses for those who cannot afford elite nursery provision. Wraparound family services are seen as a waste of money and perhaps even an unwelcome intrusion into the private realm of the family.

If Sure Start is to survive we must reframe this debate.

We must confidently reassert the importance of supporting Mum - and encouraging Dad to get involved. We must show that far more of the community need family-oriented support services than just those facing utter destitution. We must celebrate

the importance of skilled and caring Early Years workers. And we must establish beyond any doubt that our network of Children's Centres is the ideal infrastructure through which to provide coordinated Early Intervention services.

*Sure Start, Sure Future* aims to be a springboard for this debate. The purpose of the pamphlet is to proudly reaffirm the need for Sure Start and to start outlining what it might look like under a 2015 Labour Government.

We are absolutely delighted to have such a glittering array of contributors: from politicians to writers and from policy experts to a Sure Start user. From an eclectic collection of essays, three key themes emerge clearly.

### **A vision for Sure Start.**

Sure Start is still standing, but it has been buffeted and bruised in recent years. As Sharon Hodgson MP writes in her piece: *"Many Centres that I have visited have been hollowed out due to budget cuts, with qualified staff replaced by volunteers, and opening hours and activities cut back, but in every Centre I have visited, the spirit of Sure Start is still alive and well."*

We need to build on that spirit. We need to reinvigorate what Polly Toynbee calls *"one of the 1997 Government's most permanently transformative successes."* In dark times we have even greater need for hope, and Sure Start fits the bills perfectly. As Fiona Millar writes: *"It may sound like a utopian vision but we desperately need more vision in our politics, especially when it comes to children and families. Sure Start was an iconic policy in its day and can be so again."*

Labour needs to proudly place the transformative power and the human idealism of Sure Start at the heart of its plans to enthuse a weary electorate.

### **A universal offer must be at the heart of Sure Start.**

Universalism is going out of fashion. Faced with the omnipresent "difficult decisions" of austerity, it is understandably attractive to limit subsidies or freebies for the relatively wealthy. *Sure Start, Sure Future* takes no view on this wider debate – but it does believe that there is a strong rationale for universalism to remain at the heart of Sure Start.

In a passionate piece, Melissa Benn argues persuasively that universalism in Sure Start breaks down barriers and enables the spread of social capital. Furthermore, poverty is not a fixed status and universalism is the best way to support those on the cusp of poverty. As Fiona Millar argues: *"The great strength of Sure Start is that it recognizes and includes all families, rather than being aimed at a deficit model of parenting. Families move in and out of risky situations and there are times when all of us need help and support. If there is any service that should be universal and non-stigmatizing, it is this one."*

*Sure Start, Sure Future* strongly believes in targeted services as well – but a core universal offer is an important incentive to draw the hardest to reach families into Children’s Centres, where they can then receive this additional targeted support.

### **Sure Start Centres are the ideal infrastructure for Early Intervention.**

The revolutionary power of Early Intervention is now comprehensively proven. The work of Graham Allen MP and others shows beyond doubt that the best way to transform lives is to provide high quality support before a child is two years old.

Evidence also shows that this can generate substantial long term financial savings for the Government, leading Sharon Hodgson MP to note in her piece that *“the moral and the financial imperatives for investing in prevention, and the earliest of early interventions, are therefore one and the same.”*

But Early Intervention requires a strong infrastructure to be truly effective. As Graham Allen MP explains in his contribution to the pamphlet, Sure Start is ideally placed to provide this. *“For preventative programmes to work, they must be led by people who families feel they can trust, in environments where they feel at ease. This is where Sure Start really comes into its own. There are few, if any, other settings where families from all social backgrounds feel comfortable coming together to talk openly about the difficulties they are facing. There are also few settings which are so well suited to bringing together all the different aspects of support that impact on families with young children: from light touch health advice to more intensive help with issues like housing, poverty or domestic violence.”*

These are the key themes in *Sure Start, Sure Future*: a vision for Sure Start, a universal core offer and a commitment for Sure Start Centres to be the infrastructure for Early Intervention work.

Labour Friends of Sure Start hopes that *Sure Start, Sure Future* will now be a springboard for debate on how these objectives can be realized. We hope to hear as many suggestions and ideas as possible in the months ahead.

To structure this debate, Labour Friends of Sure Start is making three broad policy suggestions:

### **Sure Start as childcare plus.**

Disappointment at the loss of Sure Start childcare facilities since 2010 is a recurrent theme in *Sure Start, Sure Future*. 250 Sure Start nurseries have closed – mostly in the deprived areas which mostly desperately need them. This loss of capacity is jeopardizing the extension of free nursery places and is condemning disadvantaged families to poor quality provision.

Childcare is an essential service and significant additional capacity is needed to bring down crippling costs. We suggest that Sure Start should have an expanded role in this.

But our childcare vision must be very different from the Government's. Family support services must remain integral to Sure Start and must be integrated as closely as possible with the Sure Start childcare offer. Cllr. Catherine West encapsulates this logic perfectly in her piece by saying: *"children thrive, in part, because their family thrives."*

Labour should view Sure Start as a means to increase childcare capacity. But Sure Start should also be used to substantially enhance childcare. As Charlotte Brady explains in her beautiful piece, Sure Start is truly enriching: *"Sure Start offers an oasis of calm acceptance ... a spirit of togetherness and support, recognising and celebrating the personal nature of parenting."*

### **Control costs by limiting remits, not closing Centres.**

Childcare is expensive. Family support is largely non-statutory, and thus will always be at risk of cuts. Sure Start will face acute financial challenges for the foreseeable future. It would be gross political naivety to ignore this extremely difficult context.

We suggest that Labour explore the approach suggested by Claire McCarthy in her superb contribution to *Sure Start, Sure Future*. Rather than closing Centres, *"it is possible to target services at a smaller number of outcomes that the evidence shows can have the biggest difference. So, you reduce the remit and scope of Centres – or at least of the paid professionals who work in them – to a smaller number of interventions which focus for example on under 2s, on promoting healthy attachment, on helping parents to support their children's early learning, on getting parents back to work and out of poverty."*

To strengthen this approach we strongly support the call by Graham Allen MP for Children's Centres to work closely with the new Early Intervention Foundation, both to share their own experiences and to apply the latest best practice from other areas. In focusing services we also support Sharon Hodgson MP's excellent campaign for birth registrations to be made in Children's Centres.

Doing less, but doing it better, will limit costs and make the exchange of best practice far easier.

### **Sure Start Centres as community hubs.**

Buildings are expensive and separate offices encourage silo working. We therefore strongly support Sure Start Centres being hubs of co-location.

Locating services such as CABs and JobcentrePlus within Children's Centres will provide an enhanced service for families, bring more people into the Centres and generate potential financial savings by closing other buildings. We believe this is win:win.

It is important to acknowledge that closing buildings is often very controversial, and that other agencies such as libraries also aspire to provide one-stop community locations. However, we believe that a combination of public trust, high quality

buildings and exceptional access to hard-to-reach groups make Sure Start Centres the ideal venue for co-location.

In addition to co-location we would like to see Sure Start Centres become community hubs, providing a wider range of local services. We warmly endorse Charlotte Brady's call for Sure Start centres *to "be used as community spaces, hosting plays and comedy evenings, having space for interest groups to meet, providing training, giving advice on fundraising for local activism and encouraging people to make connections within their local community."* In fact we would go further and encourage Labour to explore models for Sure Start Co-operatives to maximise community involvement.

So we suggest a future for Sure Start as a childcare provider, but with a substantial and enriching family support function. This would be built around a reduced number of evidence-based interventions. These services would be delivered from a network of community hubs which host a range of co-located services and generate income from community lettings.

There is a huge amount of work to be done on all these ideas. Finance will of course be the biggest challenge.

But for now we are seeking comment, critique and contributions from everyone with a passion for Sure Start.

Sure Start is special. It is trusted and it is loved. Across the country communities are campaigning to save their Sure Start Centres. We must offer them hope that a Labour Government will not only protect Sure Start, but will develop and strengthen it.

We need to proudly reclaim the Sure Start vision and place it at the very heart of our plans for a One Nation Britain.

We hope that this pamphlet is a step towards reclaiming that vision and giving it renewed relevance for 2015.

I'd like to thank all the contributors to *Sure Start*, *Sure Future*, as well as the Labour Education Team and my Labour Friends of Sure Start colleagues - especially our Deputy Director, Abigail Wood.

A very special thank you goes to Sharon Hodgson MP for her incredible support for LFoSS. Sharon will be an absolutely superb Children's Minister and we excitedly look forward to her implementing some of these ideas in Government.



## **Polly Toynbee: Sure Start, one of Labour's most permanently transformative successes**

**Polly Toynbee is a journalist and writer. She is a columnist for the Guardian and the author of many successful books including *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain* and *Did Things Get Better? An Audit of Labour's Successes and Failures*.**



Looking back over Labour's 13 years, there are plenty of achievements to celebrate alongside plentiful regrets for things done and things left undone. Hindsight is a fine thing and no doubt if Blair and Brown knew then what we all know now, they would have done many things differently.

But on one thing just about everyone agrees. Labour's Early Years programme was radical and essential. What government now would dare remove free nursery schooling for all three and four year olds? This government is following through Labour's promise to extend it to many two years olds as well. Until then there was very little provision. In our book, 'The Verdict: Did Labour Change Britain?' we give the highest marks to Labour's nursery and Sure Start programme as one of that government's most permanently transformative successes.

Remember the history: at first Gordon Brown was reluctant to invest in early years until Harriet Harman, as Social Security Secretary, persuaded him that she would never hit her target for getting more single parents back to work without affordable childcare, as evidence from the rest of Europe made clear. He was persuaded by the economic argument, and the need to get mothers off benefits. Unfortunately he was not willing to challenge the large private nursery and child minder sector, and chose to fund childcare through a kind of voucher scheme – childcare credits - instead of regarding this as an extension of the welfare state to be provided like primary schools, as in Nordic countries. This has meant haphazard provision, more in affluent areas, none in poor areas, with a high turn-over of businesses as childcare makes only marginal profits.

But the movement for a much bolder and less utilitarian concept sprang up at the same time. The idea for Sure Start came partly from the American High Scope Perry pre-school programme, an experimental branch of the US Head Start scheme. Research that caught the imagination of Labour policy-makers showed that deprived children who had two years intensive home and nursery support did far better than a control group of identical children outside the scheme. The effect lasted right into their adult lives, so they were less likely to go to jail, mental hospital or draw benefits, more likely to graduate from school, get jobs and own their own homes. By the age of 30, every \$1 spent on early years had saved the state \$7 of expense on dysfunctions they had avoided.

Inside the Treasury, Norman Glass, a senior official, seized on the idea with enthusiasm, a unique case of a treasury mandarin calling for more spending and personally shepherding the scheme through to fruition. He persuaded Gordon Brown that childcare to get mothers working was only one of the benefits a high quality Early Years programme could yield in the long run. The promise was made: there would be a Sure Start in every community.

So 3,500 were set up, rightly starting in the poorest areas, and always intended to be most intensive in places of most need. The best Sure Starts offered childcare, midwives, health visitors, speech and language therapists, family counsellors, parenting classes, drop-in advice services and back-to-work training for parents. Some had cafes, staffed by parents. The idea was to make these Children's Centres a hub for the whole community, a place for families to go, either free standing or attached to a primary school. Catch a family from pregnancy, offer support and advice and any problems could be eased early on.

Labour always boasted of creating a 'cradle to grave' welfare state, but until then, the cradle was missing. This was just the start of a whole new service that would take years to develop and embed into local communities, to integrate with GPs and schools. It was always bound to be hard to get the families with the worst problems to come of their own free will: the acute depressives, alcoholics and drug addicts or others with severe difficulties shied away from contact with families who might look down on them – or they were simply not able to participate: they would need far more intensive one-to-one outreach help. It would probably have taken at least another decade to make Sure Start the universal and comprehensive service it needed to become so that no future government dare diminish it. It hadn't yet reached that stage, but it was a glorious beginning.

All politicians of all parties say they believe in 'social mobility', easy to will the ends without willing the means. The best hope for children from deprived backgrounds is that they catch up at the youngest age. Those who are hardly spoken to or read to fall behind the rest fast. By the age of 18 months the dim but well-off child starts to overtake the clever but poor child. High quality nursery education and stimulation from well-qualified nursery staff can make all the difference to a child's readiness to learn before reaching reception class, when it is nearly too late. After that, everything is remedial: Sure Start and good nursery schooling is a better investment and yet we spend on education almost in inverse proportion to its usefulness: secondary gets

more funding than primary, universities more than schools. The social class divide grows with year in education.

Although this government paid lip service to Sure Start, the closure of over 400 and the severe cutting back of services within many of the rest is an entirely predictable tragedy. Some Sure Starts are now no more than a shell with a weak private nursery inside, and Ofsted's inspections of nursery quality are sadly perfunctory and too rare. Labour made the mistake of devolving the Early Years budgets to local authorities from a central unit, when John Prescott was pressing for localisation: some councils, mostly Tory, were never enthusiastic. This government has removed the ring fence altogether with devastating results.

Worse still, the government regards childcare as no more than warehousing babies and children while parents work: children's minister Liz Truss presses for a change in the law so one childminder can care for six toddlers to cut costs. They dare not take away nursery schooling, but forget any idea of quality or improving the life chances of children. This is the end of the great ideals that founded Sure Start, with wrap-around after-school care and breakfast clubs for school children too.

Labour will need to set about repairing and reclaiming Sure Start Children's Centres as a top priority.

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at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
and **@LabourSureStart #SureStartSureFuture**



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## **Fiona Millar: The Vision has become blurred**

**Fiona Millar is a writer and campaigner on education issues. She is a former chair of the Family and Parenting Institute.**



My first direct experience of Sure Start came in 2000. The fledging Sure Start centres were just getting off the ground and my visit was with Cherie Blair, then Prime Minister's wife, who got a lump of play dough stuck on her nose, to the delight of the accompanying photographers.

We were in Hastings and the mothers using the project - they were mostly women - were forthright about its benefits. Sure Start was transforming their lives. It was one of the greatest achievements of the first post '97 Labour government.

However my hunch, since leaving No 10, and spending a decade writing and campaigning on education issues and family policy, is that the original Sure Start vision has become a blurred. Two years out from another General Election, we need to redefine why it mattered so much.

The original aim of giving children the very best start in life through a mixture of early intervention, outreach, family and parenting support was a noble one. Maybe we shouldn't have been surprised that the media went to town after early evaluations pointed out that Sure Start Centres were being heavily used by middle class families.

But this wasn't a cause of regret. The great strength of Sure Start is that it recognizes and includes all families, rather than being aimed at a deficit model of parenting. Families move in and out of risky situations and there are times when all of us need help and support. If there is any service that should be universal and non-stigmatizing, it is this one.

But over time, with the introduction of Children's Centres providing round the clock daycare, the Sure Start mission became less clear. Getting women back into work is a vital weapon in the fight against child poverty and all working families benefit from the highest quality care for their children but the focus inevitably changed.

At the primary school where I chaired the governing body at the time, we were urged by the local authority to consider developing our nursery classes into a Children's Centre. In spite of the fact that we would have benefitted from superb new facilities, the governing body declined the offer.

Why? Because this model didn't really provide the type of intense intervention we knew our most needy families needed – there was very little scope for fully subsidized places for example. Instead we would have essentially been running a small business selling childcare places to families, possibly from outside the area, who could afford the astronomical fees, with some extra services tacked on.

Then along came the coalition and Michael Gove whose very first act was to remove the words “Children” and “Families” from the title of his department. Funding cuts forced the merger or closure of Sure Start Children's Centres. Government energy was instead concentrated on curriculum, exam reform and academies, with parents only getting a look in if they wanted to set up a free school.

Anything reeking of “soft” services was sneered at in favour of a naïve belief that rote learning, putting every child in a blazer and making them learn Latin would end in an Oxbridge place. I parody to make a point but you get the gist. The idea that home environment and chaotic family life might in some way impede a child's progress up the academic ladder was subtly dismissed....until the London riots.

Suddenly family background and parenting were back on the agenda, but tragically the provision that Labour had put in place to nurture and support children and families - not just Sure Start, but parenting support advisers, family education and extended schools - was being hollowed out.

The coalition's comically feeble response was something called “Can Parent”, a £100 voucher for parents to spend on a parenting class. Billed by the Prime Minister as promoting “parents as nation builders”, it has been a dismal flop. Only 2% of parents have taken up the offer. Even the brazen Mr. Gove is probably too embarrassed to mention it.

Underlying this debate is a deeper philosophical argument about the role of the state in family life. All the main political parties proclaim the values of personal responsibility and social justice but differ in the appropriate role of the state in encouraging stability and equalizing life chances through support for families from the earliest stage.

The Conservative natural instinct is not to intervene beyond encouraging marriage. Ours must be that the state does have a role, not in telling parents how to raise their children but in implementing policies that enable all children to flourish whatever their backgrounds and recognizing that home environment, community, parenting and personal resilience count as well as traditional subjects and exams when it comes to good outcomes.

Early Intervention rarely gets mentioned these days in a public debate driven largely by the Gove agenda for secondary school reform.

But this provides an opportunity for Labour to reclaim it as our own, celebrate more vociferously what we achieved in the past and set out more clearly what an enhanced Sure Start Early Intervention Centre might look like in the future. Hopefully

with the same inclusive philosophy, but allied to affordable, or even free, childcare places as a long-term goal.

It may sound like a utopian vision but we desperately need more vision in our politics, especially when it comes to children and families. Sure Start was an iconic policy in its day and can be so again.

Please join the debate  
at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
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**Cllr. Catherine West: There can be no better investment in our society**

**Catherine West is Leader of Islington Council.**



Despite the brutal cuts imposed by the Tory-led Government, Sure Start stands as one of the great legacies of the last Labour Government.

The excellent reports by Labour MPs Frank Field and Graham Allen showing the vital importance of investing in children as early as possible were supposed to cement a cross-party consensus. Coalition Ministers welcomed the report, yet with timing that would be comic if the consequences weren't so awful, Sure Start funding was then un-ringfenced and has been remorselessly slashed every year.

Before I became a Councillor I served as Chair of the Advisory Committee of one of the early Sure Start Centres – Mitford in North Islington. At the time I also had a very young child and needed no persuading of the importance of decent and affordable childcare. It was a life-line for me and my daughter got so much out of her time there. I also saw that however important the Mitford centre was for me, there were some families for whom its services quite simply made the difference between them coping or not.

The life chances many children enjoy have been fundamentally changed and improved by Sure Start. Labour ministers realised that children thrive, in part, because their family thrives. Living in poverty, as almost half of Islington families do, is stressful and a bit of extra help and support when parents really need it can make a big difference.

In the decade since these early Sure Start Centres opened, Early Years services in Islington have become much more sophisticated. Sure Start centres are now at the centre of a web of services run by the Council, NHS, voluntary organisations and schools. Each Centre has family support staff who provide help to vulnerable families. This means every family in need can access a dedicated support worker able to understand their needs and ensure they get the right services.

Each Children's Centre is expected to contact every low income family in the area, knocking on their door if necessary, to ensure they are aware of its services. We measure how well each Centre is running this outreach and the extent to which they are engaging harder to reach families.

Crucially, Islington's sixteen Sure Start centres all still provide universal services to every family in the community, regardless of their background. Raising small kids is hard for everyone and meeting other parents can help provide valuable peer support. So each Sure Start Centre provides targeted services to families with specific needs, nursery care with fees on a sliding scale according to income and sessions like baby bounce (singing) and chatterpillars (reading and talking) for all families.

I believe Sure Start is crucial, so despite being hit hard by this government's cuts, we have kept all of our sixteen Centres open. But we've had to find savings and whilst we've protected the frontline, we've removed a layer of management at the Centres so they work together in clusters to organise their outreach. This wasn't painless because we lost some high quality and dedicated staff, but it saved the equivalent amount of money as closing a Centre, without anything like the same loss of services. We have also stopped subsidising nursery places for the most affluent families in the borough, although the high quality of the Children's Centre nurseries still means we have substantial waiting lists.

Finally, and crucially, the Labour Government invested in high quality new buildings for Sure Start Centres. In 2008 the Mitford Centre moved out of the Second World War era huts it has occupied for thirty years and into a new purpose-built centre. No more were staff and children having to cope with cold, leaking rooms and computers could actually be used – the power supply in the old buildings wasn't up to the strain! Michael Gove likes to pretend that the quality of buildings for children doesn't matter, which is why he's slashed new build after new build; but he couldn't be more wrong. Having high quality buildings is important to running high quality services and it helps encourage more parents to use them.

The pressures on public spending mean that we will have to keep looking at ways of making Sure Start Centres run as efficiently as possible. In Islington protecting these vital services is a priority and we've been able to find savings so far that don't affect the quality of the service too much, but I fear for the future if massive further Government cuts are imposed.

A Labour Government set up Sure Start Children's Centres because we understood that public spending needs to be focussed on preventing social problems in the first place not managing the consequences. There can be no better investment in our society than protecting and enhancing the network of Sure Start Centres.



## **Melissa Benn: In defence of universalism**

**Melissa Benn is a writer and campaigner on education issues.**



In 2010 I interviewed a group of relatively well heeled mothers from west London who had found their world view challenged simply as a result of sending their children to a community primary. I was deeply impressed by the ways these parents were rethinking narrow prejudices and forming unexpected friendships within their diverse inner city community.

In that same year David Cameron, a few months into his premiership of the Coalition, argued that it was important that Sure Start Children's Centres were not colonised by the 'sharp elbowed middle class' rather than being directed at those in real need.

Imagine, just for a moment, how such an argument would have been received if Cameron had suggested that a good local primary should not be used by middle class parents but be reserved only for poorer families; such a vision of social apartheid would surely have been abhorred. Looked at from another angle, it is odd that what should have been a cause for celebration - the widespread cross-class appeal of a local public service- was suddenly recast as a fresh social problem.

In fact, Cameron's comments proved to be one more phony opening salvos in what has become a deeply depressing assault on the notion of universal benefits or shared social goods and has sadly become the governing common sense of all the main political parties. The now familiar argument goes: given the deficit, we need to confine certain key services to the means tested poor. We have already seen the erosion of universal benefits, from the winter fuel allowance to child benefit, and no promise from Labour that it will restore these should it return to power.

But it is surely now, at a time of growing inequality, that we should *not* dispense with universal benefits nor abandon the vital principle of quality services used by all. The long term social cost of the separation of individuals and families according to background is too profound, indeed alarming, and far outweighs the relatively paltry economic sums involved.

Nowhere is the application of the universal principle more important than in the Early Years. Originally set up to provide vital support for low income families Sure Start became a broader, and bolder, vision with the establishment of Children's Centres in almost every area of the country. Many of these provided a place young families, across the income range, to meet for a range of shared, practical and educational purposes.

Yes, there were the inevitable Cameron-style complaints about aromatherapy or baby massage classes colonised by 'yummy mummies' but there were just as many reports of new relations forged between parents from very different backgrounds and a sense that these Centres were a beacon of shared interest and endeavour in increasingly diverse communities.

Targeting childcare support solely on poorer families raises a very different and depressing vision. It requires, for a start, a disheartening, and counter productively expensive, official concentration on the definition of 'real need' and subsequent delivery of resources, and may even involve a failure to spot who most needs help. Naomi Eistenstadt, who was in charge of the Sure Start programme from 1998, has said: *"If you only target the neediest you will miss families on the cusp (of poverty). If you wind up with only 2 to 5 per cent, you will miss the 30 per cent of the most deprived families."*

But even a service that caught the poorest third would still miss the many families, some from the middle class, possibly enduring newly straitened economic circumstances themselves, who would also benefit from local support, advice and simple friendship in the Early Years.

But of course the biggest worry about means testing is that it stigmatises need itself and leads to poor services for poor people, with the possible risk of universal alienation rather than benefit. In the words of one manager of a Children's Centre, *"If you knock on someone's door and say, 'There's a new Stay and Play on your estate. It's really fun, why don't you come?' very often they will say yes. If you say, 'Why don't we sit down with a massive form so you can tell me about all your problems?' they are going to say no."*

Again, there are strong parallels with education and health: the shared sense of citizenship that comes from using the same service as well as the discernible impact that better off families can have on local services. Those mothers whom I interviewed in 2010 had enriched their community primary in numerous ways; their social capital spread to benefit families with less time or money or 'know how.'

The Coalition's Early Years policy conceals a depressingly narrow view of social relations. With its Victorian era division between the needy and the greedy, it underwrites the de-facto and increasing separation of the classes: separate childcare, separate schools, separate universities. It also explains why, despite three years of phony progressivism, our society feels more hierarchical than ever.

Here, surely, One Nation Labour has a chance to project a more generous and genuinely inclusive vision, one in which all citizens are encouraged, through quality provision of services, to share the stages of their lives.

Yes, new ideas will surely be needed for the provision, administration and purposes of Children's Centres. But fighting to retain the idea and the infrastructure, insisting on high quality and cross class appeal, stands now as an important beacon of future possibility.

Please join the debate  
at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
and [@LabourSureStart](#) [#SureStartSureFuture](#)



**Graham Allen MP: The Future of Sure Start: a hub for Early Intervention**

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**Graham Allen is MP for Nottingham North and Chair of the Early Intervention Foundation's Board of Trustees.**



This spring saw the launch of the new, independent Early Intervention Foundation which will champion and support the greater use of Early Intervention measures to tackle the root causes of social problems amongst children and young people.

The Foundation and Sure Start Centres share common ground – the desire to help children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those hard to reach families who are most in need of the services on offer.

Many of the persistent and inter-generational social problems continue to grow because some of our children are not given the right type of support in their earliest years, when they experience critical periods of development. There is a correlation between negative early experiences and later development, so missed opportunities to target a problem early on can have long-term consequences.

As a snapshot of the cost to the public purse of dealing with these problems it is worthwhile noting that the Government has estimated that the 120,000 most troubled families in England access public services at a cost of £9bn a year – ranging from social workers, health visitors, drug and alcohol teams, mental health workers, job centre staff, housing officers and others. So, Early Intervention is about giving children the best possible start in life, but it is also about making savings for the struggling taxpayer.

Looking ahead to the future of Sure Start, it strikes me that Children's Centres could take a leading role in the Early Intervention agenda, prioritising those evidence-based services which help children to develop a strong social and emotional bedrock and in doing so, heading off future problems before they are able to take root.

Sure Start Centres are much loved by parents and children alike and have been woven into the community fabric, but evidence on their effectiveness has been mixed. A key consideration for providers must be to consider how they develop and deliver services and interventions which have a strong evidence base and a rigorous evaluation system, to ensure the best possible outcomes and provide value for money. I'm sure Professor Kathy Sylva, who is currently involved in evaluating

Children's Centres as part of the consortium of NatCen, Frontier Economics and the University of Oxford, will provide us with much food for thought on these issues. I should add that The Early Intervention Foundation is very lucky to have Kathy as a member of its Evidence Panel.

Sure Start has evolved considerably since it arrived on the scene in 1998 and perhaps its next steps should be to build on the diverse range of family support services it delivers. Centres are now targeted by a range of public health agencies, education bodies, relationship support charities and crime prevention services, all seeking to forge strong partnerships and benefit from the unique relationship and expertise that Sure Start staff have developed with vulnerable families. To demonstrate the broad range of issues Sure Start now addresses, 88% of centres currently offer support for families experiencing domestic violence and many play an integral role in local authority anti-poverty strategies.

The vast geographical area that Sure Start Children's Centres cover provides a vital opportunity to make gains with lots of children. Additionally, the expert knowledge that staff have of local issues means that they are ideally placed to provide relevant support for families, but I think we would all agree that more needs to be done to identify and engage the hard to reach families.

The future of Sure Start will depend on its ability to continually review and reassess the support they offer to make sure it is meeting the needs of the families they serve.

In many areas, Sure Start is bringing together cross sector partnerships, particularly in the areas of health and Early Years education, to deliver an integrated and truly family-friendly service. Sure Start outreach and family support workers often now work alongside social workers and other professionals providing support to families in their home and in the Centre. This is especially important for families with complex problems who often need help in several areas of their lives. Behind the scenes this means support being woven seamlessly together, with professionals across disciplines continually sharing information and updating one another on new developments.

For preventative programmes to work, they must be led by people who families feel they can trust in environments where they feel at ease. This is where Sure Start really comes into its own. There are few, if any, other settings where families from all social backgrounds feel comfortable coming together to talk openly about the difficulties they are facing. There are also few settings which are so well suited to bringing together all the different aspects of support that impact on families with young children, from light touch health advice to more intensive help with issues like housing, poverty or domestic violence.

If we fail to capitalise on the unique place that Sure Start occupies in our communities, we will miss out on a vital, perhaps one off, opportunity to reach families in a way that encourages and empowers them to become part of their own solution. Only by addressing families on their own terms and turf and continually striving to ensure evidencing the positive outcomes being achieved can we hope to

secure the future of Sure Start, and with it, the long lasting impact it delivers for families up and down the country.

Please join the debate  
at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
and **@LabourSureStart #SureStartSureFuture**



## **Ben Thomas: Defend Sure Start**

**Ben Thomas is National Officer for Education & Children's Services at UNISON**



Sure Start Centres have always been much more than just buildings. The most important part of the Centre has always been the staff and children within them. UNISON welcomes the launch of Labour Friends of Sure Start and believes that any campaign to protect Sure Start needs to cover the staff and services and not just the buildings.

Whilst the headline figures may show that a relatively small number of centres have closed since 2010, the cuts to staff and services have been much more dramatic. The DfE survey showed that the number of staff employed in centres fell by 22% in 2010/11 alone and this was before the cuts really began to take effect.

Since the Coalition government came to power and removed the requirement to provide childcare, UNISON research shows more than half of centres have stopped providing these services onsite. Practitioners report that having good childcare available was always the key gateway to getting families and children involved in the centre. It is some of the most deprived areas that are feeling the worst impact of cuts. The number of places of full day care in Children's Centres in the 30% most deprived areas fell from 38,200 in 2007 to 20,000 in 2011.

Once families started attending and had got to know the staff, they were much more willing to use the other services in the Centre. Staff report that these childcare cuts are really beginning to affect the services they provide and making it more difficult to reach the families Sure Start was designed to help.

Members are also seeing that services that were once free are now being charged for; a policy that is affecting those most in need of support from Children's Centres and those least able to pay.

The Conservative Party complained at the last election when we said that Sure Start Centres would not be safe in their hands. They said they would protect these services and that we were simply scaremongering. Unfortunately, the reality has proved much worse than we feared at the time.

Only last week, the Conservative run Warwickshire County Council announced the possibility that all of its 39 Centres face, only weeks after promising their future was safe. Of course, this promise was made before the last council elections took place.

We fear this is just the beginning of a series of similar announcements from councils resulting from the abolition of the early intervention grant and that more cuts are likely to follow. We fear that the cuts will mean much of the progress made through the early investment in Sure Start being lost as key staff are lost, along with their skills and experience. This will risk Sure Start being branded a failure.

UNISON believes that a renewed commitment to Sure Start should form a key part of the next Labour manifesto. We need to remind voters of the original vision of Sure Start and why the ideas that inspired the vision still make sense.

Staff in Centres and the families that use the Centres understand this vision. Children's Centres are still leading the way in integrated working and sharing information. Centres have stopped professionals working in isolation and staff have seen the real benefits this brings for families and children. They have allowed the most deprived families to get real long term solutions that can break the cycle and give them confidence and choices. They have raised aspirations and have made parents to want more and feel worthwhile too.

Staff in Centres still believe they can make a difference, but only if they are given the investment and support from government they deserve.

Please join the debate  
at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
and **@LabourSureStart #SureStartSureFuture**





**Claire McCarthy: Sure Start Children's Centres,  
a bright future despite the gloom**

**Claire McCarthy is Director of Public Affairs at 4Children.**



Sure Start Children's Centres are rightly seen as one of the previous Labour government's proudest achievements. Personifying, as they do, the generational sea-change in investment in early childhood that took place after 1997. What began as a small, niche programme in the poorest areas, has become a nationwide network of indispensable community hubs, providing a broad spectrum of light touch and intensive family support. At a time when reductions in public spending have seen many family services scaled back or in some cases disappear entirely, Children's Centres have shown impressive resilience.

That is not to say that these are not very tough times for Children's Centres. In some areas Centres have been closed or substantially hollowed out. But our experience is that this is the case in a minority of areas. More often we see local authorities stretching every sinew to maintain front-line services and putting their Centres at the heart of their move to integrate services and intervene earlier with families who may otherwise slip into crisis.

It is true that the policy and funding context has changed the way that many Centres operate and the services they provide. There has been a perceptible shift towards Centres working harder to reach the families that can benefit most from their work. Indeed the new Ofsted framework requires Centres to 'reach' 97% of the families in their area as a prerequisite for achieving 'outstanding' in their inspection. The family support offer has been intensified and Centres are increasingly playing a key role in working with families in need and children on the edge of care with a growing number providing support to families experiencing substance misuse, domestic violence and parental mental health. In other words the critique that Centres were simply a place for middle class mums to access free activities, is now completely inaccurate and outdated.

Many leading Children's Centres have also put Early Intervention at the heart of their approach. Now, it is true that Early Intervention is a broad concept which is taking some time to embed itself, not least because of the simultaneous pressures on local authorities to focus dwindling resources on child protection and those families who

are already in crisis. However, experienced professionals including Children's Centre managers know that intervening early is in the best interest of children, families and society as a whole. That is why so many Children's Centres are focusing far more strategically on services which can strengthen and promote resilience within families. Conflict resolution, employment support, parenting skills and ante-natal and post natal health are just some of the issues that are now commonly addressed in Children's Centres. But, importantly this continues to be done in the context of a universal offer that means that Centre doors are open to all and therefore avoid the stigma of services aimed at those who are deemed to be 'failing'.

By the time this article has been published we will know how Children's Centre funding has fared in the Spending Review for 2015/16. Given the scale of further savings the Chancellor is looking to make from 'non-protected' areas this is a time of grave concern for those of us who know the positive difference that the investment in Early Years and Early Intervention can make. If the decision has been to make further reductions in what was (briefly) called the Early Intervention Grant then 'friends of Sure Start' from all political parties will be looking at some tough decisions ahead.

Some are arguing that rather than spread the 'jam' even more thinly across the remaining 3,000 Centres that the better solution would be close large swathes of Centres and redistribute the resources to ensure that those Centres can continue to provide a fully comprehensive offer. Superficially attractive as that may sound, I would urge Labour to firmly reject that option for four primary reasons.

Firstly, as 80% of brain cell development takes place by the time a child reaches age 3, it is now increasingly being recognized that the experiences a child has from conception to age 2 have a considerable impact on later life chances. Interventions during this period to, for example promote strong attachment and early language skills provide significant impact and excellent value for money. But without a significant national network of Children's Centres this will be impossible to achieve at scale.

Secondly, Children's Centre provision in many areas is no longer a programme of service delivery it is a system for providing children and families with a range of services in a joined up way – be that health visiting, debt or employment advice, help with parenting, support for SEN or other additional needs. If the Centre was no longer there, costs to the local authorities and other agencies would increase. A strong argument for getting better at pooling local budgets and more effectively recycling savings – not one for driving services back into their silos.

Thirdly, around one third of all poor children do not live in the poorest areas. Therefore closing Centres in less deprived areas will exclude these families – who are already very isolated - from accessing services. In addition, the third phase of Children's Centres that was rolled out (those in essentially these more prosperous areas) receive a far smaller chunk of the resources in any case, so savings will be relatively limited.

Finally, there are other available solutions and you should never use a sledgehammer to crack a nut unless you really have to. Instead of targeting Centres either in a smaller number of areas or exclusively to vulnerable families, it is possible to target services at a smaller number of outcomes that the evidence shows that can have the biggest difference. So, you reduce the remit and scope of Centres – or at least of the paid professionals who work in them – to a smaller number of interventions which focus for example on under 2s, on promoting healthy attachment, on helping parents to support their children's early learning, on getting parents back to work and out of poverty. With a universal offer largely maintained by harnessing the power of the community and volunteers.

This approach, particularly if accompanied by a real new push on Health and Jobcentre Plus to become full delivery partners within Centres across the country and a move to get more families through the door early by moving birth registration into Children's Centres could provide a really bright future for Sure Start even in these dark times.

Labour's offer to families at the next election must be based on what we know families need; services and support in their local community, that are there when they are needed, that don't make them feel like a failure for asking for help, which give children the best possible start in life, which overcome disadvantage and promote social mobility, which prevent problems from arising and nip emerging issues in the bud. That is what Children's Centres do and must keep on doing for the good of us all.

## **Alex Mirza: A unique way of providing a lifeline**

**Alex Mirza is Head of Education at Academus.**



Academus, an on line virtual, live and interactive education provision, was established in May 2009 to address the needs of growing number of pupils who are unable to attend school for a variety of reasons such as:

- teenage mums,
- having learning difficulties,
- school phobia,
- being on the autistic spectrum,
- gifted and talented.

Academus is a online solution which works with flexibility and cost effectiveness.

In the light of the excellent and measured success of the many great services such as the Sure Start Centres – and sadly its cuts due to funding - Academus strongly believes that by setting up a virtual provision for the community will not only fulfil the need of the community but also bring about a 21<sup>st</sup> Century solution. This will enable communities and families with the freedom of accessing new technologies especially at a time when life is all but becoming digitalised and those out of this range will not only find themselves disadvantaged and vulnerable but also disenfranchised from the system and society.

The Virtual Sure Start Centre's aim is to become more than a mere online conference service and the focus will be high on key recommendations of the OECD in order to support users by offering:

- personalisation in learning,
- motivation techniques and support,
- the use of diverse sources of information
- as well as increasing a culture of learning that has become endemic in the disaffection of both children and adults in learning centres all across Europe.

The OECD and CERI (Centre for Education, Research and Innovation) are the major trigger for Academus' raison d'être and passion working towards the building and developing of long life learning provisions using four key areas in order to support and re-engage learners back into education and work through the harnessing of 21<sup>st</sup> Century technologies.

The Academus model of learning is closely mapped on these recommendations which studies show is the way to successfully help and support individuals seeking career advice, offering a choice and encouraging collaborations with others in order

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Sure Start, Sure Future.

Labour Friends of Sure Start, 2013.

Page 28

to seek new opportunities that is not only unique but is now becoming the ubiquitous culture of this century.

However, as these technologies evolve there is a greater emphasis on understanding, developing and unifying their use for the support of the individual pedagogies based on personalisation, motivation as well as facilitation of the use of diverse information sources. Looking at these individually and understanding the reason and motivation behind the OECD recommendations, there is a requirement to closely appreciate all four key recommendations.

**Personalisation:** The last 15-20 years has seen an explosion of our understanding of the brain and thus influenced our understanding of the individual learner. In a traditional classroom of the 21<sup>st</sup> century one can expect to find learners with:

- learning difficulties,
- those on the autistic spectrum,
- with ADHD,
- classroom phobia or
- mental and emotional difficulties,
- as well as victims of bullying or
- on the medically ill register or
- indeed learners facing language and cultural difficulties as a result of forced or economic migration in an ever changing world

All under one standard learning situation and under the care of an over-stretched teacher.

Despite the wonderful job done by the many teachers in our education system, it is a recognised fact that effective learning can only occur if each learner receives a customized learning experience - something which is next to impossible to aim for in a traditional setting. The Academus classroom pedagogy supports the individual learner to engage with their learning by having smaller classes, greater differentiation and a unique system of support for each and every learner.

**The importance of motivation and learning:** The motivation to learn, the belief about one's own abilities and the existence of learning strategies are a precondition for successful and lifelong learning; this is endorsed by PISA (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment).

These findings are further supported by the results from neuroscience and brain studies. These show that many learners disengage with learning as they are overwhelmed by negative emotions that can be caused in a classroom, for example the facing of material that the learner finds incomprehensible and thus generate a negative response within the learner. Not to say that materials are generally incomprehensible in classroom- far from it as teachers spend long hours preparing for their subjects - however, the limitations of a large class with multiple needs does not in fact allow the impact that motivation can have in the individual's learning. Academus is able to support these needs through technology.

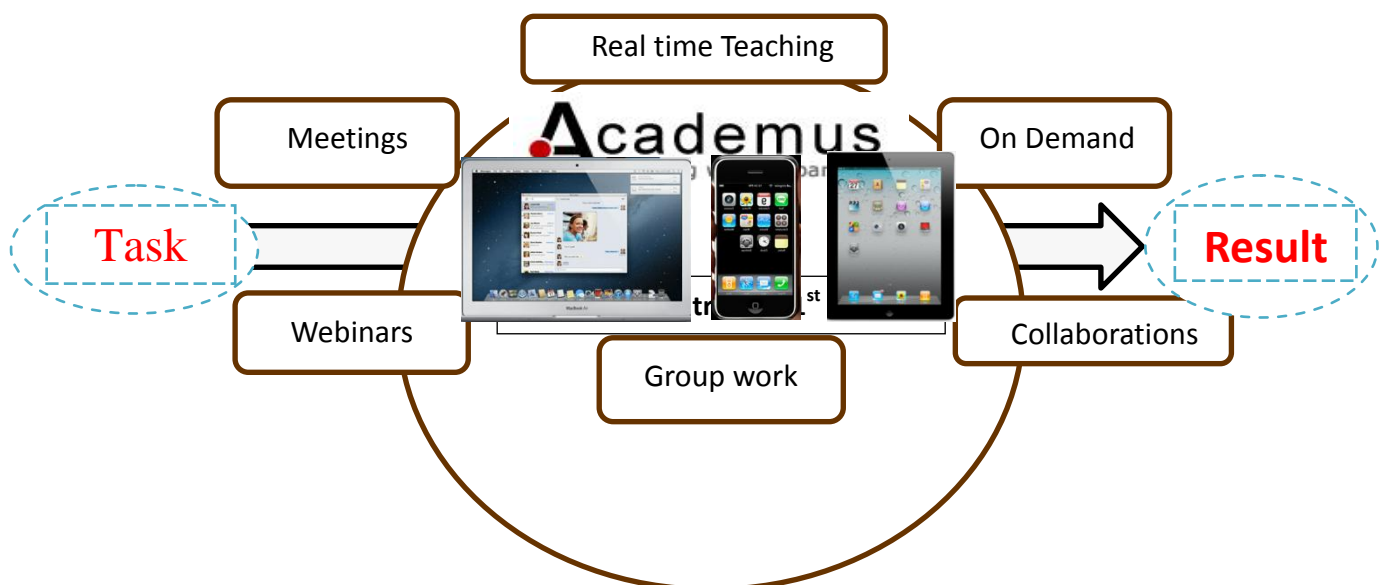
**Use of diverse knowledge sources:** Learners can acquire knowledge whenever they need it from a variety of sources: books, technology, and experts around the globe. ICTs have become more and more important in today's world to acquire knowledge. All modern classrooms support this form of learning and Academus is not far from this method of teaching.

**Learning - how to make it culturally accepted by all:** We are knowledge based economies in this century and as such our creativity and innovation are at the centre of what we trade. Learning however has lost its appeal for many in our societies through various reasons that have been researched and studied. In order for learning to become culturally accepted, teaching and learning itself needs to adhere to the cultural norms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century else we face a return to tried and tested methods that have failed many in our societies.

The growth and expansion of the Internet – which is constantly being improved- as well as the modern lifestyle where a large amount of every individual's life is spent using some form of hardware and software technologies, information is accessible digitally through videos, audios, blogs, texting etc. and more opportunities to attend real time virtual learning from anywhere.

Technologies have become an inherent part of modern life - more so for the younger generation - and in this light, Academus has developed a model that works to provide all these opportunities to the learner by incorporating technology within learning. The result of which is integrating learning within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture. This not only caters for a culture where learning becomes acceptable and even indeed fashionable but also places the individual at the centre of their learning and achievement thus giving ownership to the individual.

The Academus model below provides a snapshot of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## **The Virtual Sure Start Centre**

Academus believes that by establishing the model above to provide a virtual centre for Sure Start, it will establish a unique way of providing communities, families and individuals a lifeline and support where many services are offered including learning for the whole family ranging from health and well-being to indeed parenting, job seeking and improving integration within the wider society.

In our vision, the aim of the Virtual Sure Start is to offer all its members a unique opportunity of becoming part of a larger collaboration. We intend to do this by bringing various services and skills under one umbrella. Providing a platform for meetings and group work as well as a hub where the many gifted and talented individuals dispersed throughout the UK can collaborate. This will create the opportunity to contribute their expertise in a way not done before. Without barriers.

Academus firmly places the family at the centre of all learning as families make communities and nations. Supporting family learning is essential to support all parts of our society; not merely by leading people through diktats and changes but allowing natural growth and excellence which has individual ownership.

Academus would welcome the opportunity to support and develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century Sure Start Centres which are not only needed but in our opinion crucial to the growth of our societies both personally and economically and as such are keen to be part of this continued new learning revolution which we are proud to be pioneering.

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## **Jill Rutter: Keep Sure Start Nurseries Open!**

**Jill Rutter is Research Manager at the Family and Childcare Trust.**



Access to high quality early education and childcare has always been difficult in deprived parts of the UK. This was acknowledged in the 1998 and 2004 Childcare Strategies and led to the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative, launched in 2000. Building on this, all Sure Start centres in 30 per cent most deprived areas were required to provide full daycare. But in November 2010 this obligation was removed and since then, many local authorities have closed nursery provision in Sure Start Children's Centres. The closure of these nurseries is now impacting on local authorities' ability to offer places for two year olds who will qualify for part-time free early education this year and in 2014. The Family and Childcare Trust believes that high quality early education and childcare must be part of a future Sure Start.

Until 2010 all Phase 1 Sure Start children's centres were obliged to provide full daycare (defined as at least 40 hours nursery provision per week over 48 weeks of the year) as part of their core offer. There was also an expectation that some Phase 2 Children's Centres should provide full daycare, if they were in the 20-30 per cent most deprived areas. In November 2010 this obligation was removed. Since then Sure Start nurseries have closed and in other cases local authorities have put council-run nurseries in Children's Centres out to tender to private and not-for-profit organizations as part of restructuring and spending cuts. The Family and Childcare Trust is in the process of mapping these closures across England. Preliminary analysis suggests that up to 100 nurseries have closed in London alone.

The Family and Childcare Trust is concerned that the loss of daycare in Children's Centres is compromising local authorities' ability to find sufficient numbers of early education places for the estimated 296,300 two year old children who will qualify for this provision by September 2014<sup>1</sup>. One of the challenges that local authorities face in identifying places for two year olds who will qualify is the geographic mismatch between existing nursery provision which is more likely to be located in affluent areas - where there is greatest demand from working parents - and the demand for places for two year olds, which is highest in the least affluent areas. Our evidence suggests that rural shire counties appear to be particularly badly affected by this

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<sup>1</sup> Rutter, J., Evans, B and Singler, R. (2012) *Supporting London local government to deliver free early education for disadvantaged two year olds*, London: Daycare Trust



mismatch between nursery provision and the demand for two year old free places. Given that Sure Start is more likely to be located in the least affluent areas, the loss of daycare in Sure Start Children's Centres means that two year olds who will qualify for the free early education cannot be placed there.

There has been a trend for private and voluntary sector nurseries in deprived areas to be of lower quality than those in the more affluent parts of the country. If Ofsted gradings are used as a measure of quality, the 2010 results showed just 8 per cent of nurseries and pre-schools in the 20 per cent most deprived areas were graded as outstanding, 57 per cent were good, 32 per cent were satisfactory and 3 per cent were inadequate. In the 20 per cent most affluent part of England, 13 per cent of provision was outstanding, 61 per cent was good, 23 per cent was adequate and 2 per cent was inadequate.

The existence of Sure Start centre nurseries in deprived areas played a part in reversing this trend, given that nursery staff in Sure Start nurseries are more likely to hold higher level qualifications than their counterparts in nurseries offering daycare outside Sure Start Children's Centres. (In the 30 per cent most deprived areas 22 per cent of Sure Start nursery staff hold Level 6 qualifications, compared with 10 per cent in nurseries outside children's centres<sup>2</sup>). For this reason it is important to keep this provision and for Sure Start to work with local childcare providers outside their centres.

The Family and Childcare Trust believes that it is essential that Sure Start Centres in deprived areas offer high quality early education and care. While the Government justified the removal of the obligation to provide full daycare on the grounds of under-occupancy of some Sure Start nurseries, we believe that the roll out of the two year old free early education offer would have reversed the trend towards under-occupancy. Additionally, in some areas where there vacant places in Sure Start nurseries, there are shortages in other forms of early education and childcare for the under fives, particularly in sessional childcare for student parents, those on job-related training or those parents with work hours that change from week-to-week.

The Family and Childcare Trust has argued for local authorities to make better use of some of vacant Sure Start provision by making it available to parents who need sessional childcare to help them into work. For this reason, a future Sure Start must include early education and childcare.

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Education (DfE) (2012) Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey 2011, London: DfE

## Charlotte Brady: Why I love Sure Start

**Charlotte Brady is a Sure Start user and campaigner from Yorkshire.**



I live in a small village near Halifax. My eldest son goes to the local village school which has 80-ish children, all of whom are white, most of whom are middle-class. When he was two, he thought a lady we met wearing niqab was a ninja.

This isn't my background, and it isn't really his. I grew up in the diversity that is Leeds. Calderdale, where we now are, is also brilliantly diverse - just not our part of it. For us, one of many ways in which Sure Start has improved our lives is by enabling us to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

The Centres bring people from the local community together, often with the only thing in common being the challenge of parenting. They provide a safe space to ask questions, learn new skills, share a funny story or bond over the frustrations of parenthood.

When you have a baby there is a deluge of advice and criticism about parenting. Friends, strangers and, of course, your mother become evangelical in their efforts to convince you that having a sleep routine, having no routine, using a sling, using a pram, using real nappies, using no nappies, breastfeeding, bottle-feeding, baby-led weaning, spoon feeding, crying it out and co-sleeping is the only way to ensure your child doesn't grow up unruly, stupid, obese, or psychotic. I know, because I am guilty of doing this too.

Sure Start offers an oasis of calm acceptance that you, as an unique individual raising another unique individual, are doing just fine. In fact, better than that, that you are actually doing pretty well. Of course, they offer advice and training too and I have found these invaluable, but it is offered in a spirit of togetherness and support, recognising and celebrating the personal nature of parenting.

As a new mum, it was incredibly daunting to find myself alone with my new son. What was I supposed to do with him? How do you entertain someone who can't yet focus their eyes properly and spends a large proportion of their day yelling at you?

Sure Start helped me relax. It helped me get out of the house, try new things, meet other parents. Sure Start helped me realise that parenting isn't a test of endurance but a fun, relaxed experience. Except when we all have to get out of the house in the morning (there are some things even Sure Start can't do!).

One of the things I love most about Sure Start is the nursery my children attend. We could, just about, afford to send them to a private nursery. We had a place booked. It was lovely. It had a sensory room, a library, offered French and music lessons, and would even do your washing and ironing. But it was also huge, impersonal and scarily expensive. It felt like a nursery that catered for parents, not children.

In contrast, our Sure Start nursery is 'pre-loved'. It's a bit worn around the edges. The outside space is limited and unappealing. And they don't do ironing. But the care is exceptional. The staff are relatively well-paid, so retention rates are excellent and they attract the best candidates. Many of the staff caring for my third child also cared for the other two. They have decent holiday and sick pay, so have time to recharge and don't return to work whilst still infectious. The numbers of children are small, allowing the staff to develop a deeply personal relationship with each child and their family, and the staff are well-trained, covering areas such as parental separation, bereavement, domestic violence and addiction. Sure Start nurseries offer an integrated service, providing children with on-site support in speech therapy, behavioural support or physiotherapy.

I am lucky that my children were able to go to a Sure Start nursery. In the midst of the maelstrom that is the current debate on childcare - think ratios, tax credits, lengthening school days etc - the answer is obvious. Every pre-school child should, from birth, be able to go to a Sure Start nursery, ideally free of charge.

There are an estimated 1m women who want to work, but can't because childcare is too expensive. That's 1m women not paying tax and needing State support. According to the Institute of Public Policy Research, if women returning to full-time work had free childcare, not only would the tax paid by those women cover the cost of the childcare, it would put an extra £4k per person into the national kitty. In addition, because Sure Start nurseries don't make a profit, every penny spent directly benefits the children.

I would like to see Sure Start Centres developing in two ways: widening the remit of support they offer and becoming places of community regeneration.

Family support would continue to be provided through training, drop-in sessions, coffee, and chat, but would be extended to offer specific activities for other carers such as grandparents, foster parents and those offering respite care. In addition, the Sure Start remit would grow to include helping families with children in primary school by offering training and support in areas such as helping with homework, developing social skills, creative activities, and health education.

On evenings and at weekends the Sure Start centres would be used as community spaces, hosting plays and comedy evenings, having space for interest groups to

meet, providing training, giving advice on fundraising for local activism and encouraging people to make connections within their local community.

Sure Start staff would go out into the local community, working with other service providers, such as libraries and leisure centres, to offer more community activities for families, for example storytelling, den-building, physical fitness sessions, and cookery lessons.

These activities would draw more people into the centres and encourage communities to grow and develop in the way Sure Start Centres encourage families to do so. It would build on one of the main successes of Sure Start - bringing people together to share their experience and provide mutual support - to ensure that children were given the best possible start not only within their family, but within their community and that the community would continue to support them and their families as they grow.

My family and I have benefited so much from our local Sure Start Centre in Sowerby Bridge. I sincerely hope that other families and communities will do so long into the future.

Please join the debate  
at [www.laboursurestart.com](http://www.laboursurestart.com)  
and **@LabourSureStart #SureStartSureFuture**



## **Sharon Hodgson MP: Sure Start should be at the centre of One Nation Britain**

**Sharon Hodgson MP is the Shadow Children's Minister.**



Sure Start is under pressure – we all know that.

Politicians – myself included – often focus on facts and figures, and those figures are stark ones. At the last count, there were 515 fewer registered Children's Centres than at the 2010 election, and by the time of the 2015 election the fund which pays for Sure Start and other vital Early Years and Early Intervention programmes will be more than 40% lower than it was in 2010.

After the former Children's Minister Sarah Teather announced that Children's Centres in the poorest areas didn't have to provide full daycare, more than 30% stopped doing so within the year – a loss of 250 high quality nurseries in areas where private and voluntary providers struggle to operate viably, contributing to the childcare crisis we now face in this country.

Freedom of Information requests have also told us that many Centres have had to shed their most qualified staff members – those who had the passion as well as the expertise to lead practice and bring on other staff.

But Sure Start was always, and still is, about more than facts and figures; it's about feelings, it's about happier and healthier families, and it's about forging friendships. At its best, Sure Start is about improving lives.

I've been moved to tears on many occasions listening to the stories of parents whose outlooks have literally been transformed because of Sure Start. I've seen mums who were once too depressed to leave the house and meet other people but now play a leading role in Centres helping others like them, and I've seen a dad who confessed to being on the verge of suicide before he discovered Sure Start confidently addressing a room of top politicians in Parliament.

Many Centres that I have visited have been hollowed out due to budget cuts, with qualified staff replaced by volunteers, and opening hours and activities cut back, but in every Centre I have visited, the spirit of Sure Start is still alive and well. In spite of

taking a real beating from this Tory-led Government, Children's Centre workers are still determined to transform lives, and it is thanks to their determination that there will be a Sure Start left for Labour to save in 2015.

But how will we do that?

Clearly, the state of the economy and public finances means we will have an extremely difficult job restoring funding to the levels of 2010, but that doesn't mean we can't make the case. The Shadow Chancellor has already made clear that Early Intervention and prevention is one of the areas which will once again be a priority for a Labour government, and he is right to argue for that.

There are two clear reasons why we should focus on prevention and Early Intervention: because we have a moral duty to improve the life chances of the most vulnerable children, and because we want to build a stronger and more sustainable economy for the future.

We know that a poor first couple of years can have a significant impact on a child's outcomes in later life. They're more likely to have health problems; more likely to have language delay and communication problems; more likely to be behind when they start school, and stay behind throughout; more likely to engage in risky behaviours, such as violence, drinking, underage sex and drug use; more likely to end up going through the criminal justice or care system, and less likely to gain good qualifications and go on to further or higher education; and therefore more likely to be unable to hold down meaningful relationships or jobs.

Those individuals are then less likely to be able to provide the kind of secure first few years that their children need, and the cycle starts all over again. The human cost is bad enough, but there's also the cost to the government, and therefore to everybody else, of all the support that they will need throughout their life.

The moral and the financial imperatives for investing in prevention and the earliest of early interventions are therefore one and the same. It's been proven time and time again to deliver financial and social returns which benefit the whole of society; for example, the return on investment in Nurse Family Partnerships in America was calculated at up to \$34,000 per child by the age of 15 – a ratio of up to 5 to 1.

But even given the strong case for investment, rebuilding Sure Start is going to be about more than money. In some areas it's going to be about refinement; in others, it's going to be about reinvention. The kind of return achieved by Family Nurse Partnerships can't be evidenced for every programme, and when there's less money around we need to make sure that every penny of it is spent in a way that will have real and demonstrable benefit.

We need to stand up for Sure Start, but Sure Start also needs to stand up for itself by proving the impact that it has on the communities and the families it serves, and where it cannot, acknowledging that and challenging itself to improve. Now that we have Graham Allen's Early Intervention Foundation, I hope that local authorities and other organisations running Children's Centres will look to it as a repository for best

practice and proven intervention schemes, which could and should be used across the country.

One area in particular where many Centres need to do more is in bringing in those families who we currently describe as 'hard to reach'. Too many families are still either unaware of what's on offer at their local Centre, or lack the confidence to go along for the first time.

One way we can improve this almost overnight is by making sure that Children's Centres are given information about live births in their catchment area by the NHS, so that outreach workers know which doors to knock on and target age-specific services more effectively.

We also need to encourage greater co-location of services that new and expectant parents need, such as birth registrations and ante-natal classes – services which will mean that every parent has a reason to make that first visit to their local Centre, where they won't be able to help but see all the opportunities and facilities that are available to them.

I've been working on a cross-party basis with Conservative MP Andrea Leadsom to try and press the Government to do this as part of the Children and Families Bill, and we have received assurances from Ministers that pilots are being developed, so hopefully we will be in a position to roll these out comprehensively in 2015.

Of course, finding new parents and even getting them through the door is of little use unless Children's Centres are providing the kind of services that they actually want. I talked earlier about targeted and evidence-based interventions, but to support that there must also be universal services which can bring in children and families and thereby bring their needs to the attention of Centre staff, who can then discuss with them the kind of help they think they need.

Stay and plays, toy libraries, baby and fathers groups, even (actually, especially) the much-maligned baby massage; all of these can be the accessible and welcoming entry point for a parent who may well need further help, but would never engage directly with those who can provide it, whether that's because they're intimidated, put off by the stigma associated with it, or simply don't have any idea it exists.

We can learn a great deal from the work that Action for Children and the Innovation Unit have done on encouraging Sure Start users to play an active part in delivering this kind of service for themselves and others, helping reach more families by introducing their friends and neighbours to Sure Start, as well as helping to shape provision by actively participating in designing services.

Where it is done well, everyone gains from this kind of approach – there are more services available that families want, more families access them, the volunteers gain experience and confidence which can help them find work, as well as gaining a greater stake in their public services, and, of course, Children's Centres get more bang for their limited bucks.

These are a few quick wins, but I am determined to work on a comprehensive plan for Sure Start and early intervention between now and 2015, and I'll be looking to Labour Friends of Sure Start to help in developing those policies.

The facts and figures are dire, and should be a constant source of embarrassment for a Government whose two leaders both said on the eve of the election that they would protect Sure Start. However, in spite of – and certainly not because of – all the changes that this Government has made, Sure Start remains a fantastic asset for communities across the country, and can and should be at the centre of One Nation Britain in 2015 and beyond.

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