

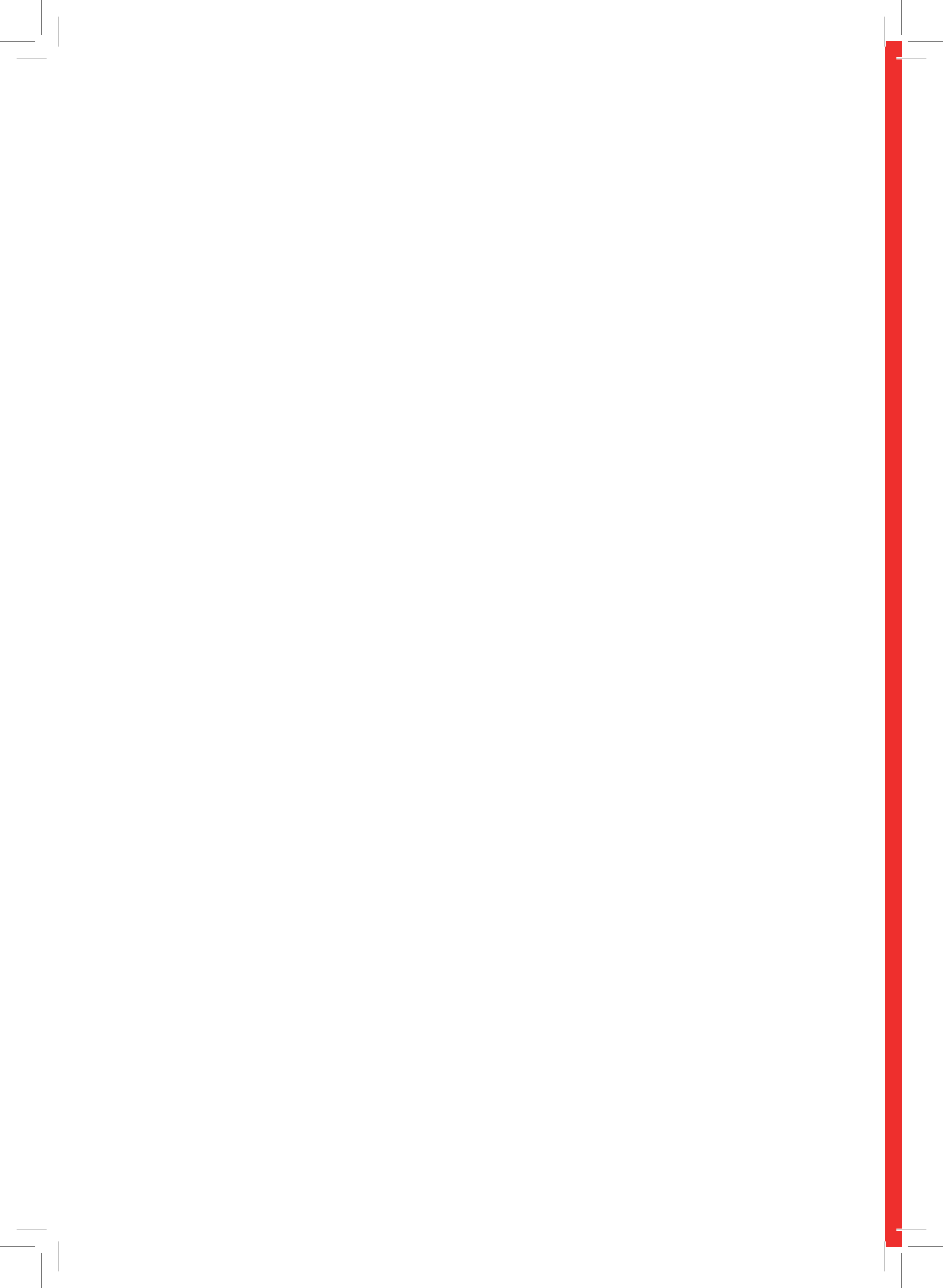


Labour Friends
of **Sure Start**



**There is always an
alternative**

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CONTENTS

- 01 **Foreword**
Yvette Cooper, LFoSS patron
- 04 **Introduction**
- 05 **Part One: what a difference a Labour Council makes**
- 07 **Part Two: saving money, saving Sure Start**
- 11 **Conclusion: there is always an alternative**

Yvette Cooper - Foreword

Sure Start is a life line for new families across the country. At one of the most important times in a family's life, it provides the support and opportunities that stand parents and children in good stead for many years to come. But right now it is under terrible threat.



I believe Sure Start was one of the most important achievements of the last Labour Government. And as the Minister responsible for rolling it out across the country, its certainly the thing I'm proudest of. Not just for the network of 4,000 Children's Centres, but even more importantly for the services, ideas and approach at the heart of Sure Start - putting young children and the family at the heart of communities and local services for the very first time. Sure Start is about giving every child the very best start in life.

Tackling poverty, disadvantage and inequality were always at the heart of Sure Start - understanding that what happens in those early years affects a child and their family for decades to come. It was also a new way of delivering services - bringing child care, health services, employment support and child development all together in the community rather than making parents struggle between different organisations. And it put the family and community rather than the professionals at the heart of Sure Start too - preventing new parents becoming isolated through the company and support of other local families. For a generation of working mums Sure Start has been incredibly empowering. For a generation of children it has given them a better start in life.

But across the country now, Sure Starts are closing. Hit by the sheer scale of Tory cuts to local government funding, but also by Tory neglect and disinterest. It is a disgrace that over 800 Sure Start Centres have closed already, and many more

are under threat now. Yet as we know well, supporting and investing in children in their early years pays dividends for years to come - for them, for their families, for the community and for local services and taxpayers too. Impoverishing our children now will cost us all more in the long run.

That is why the work of Labour Councillors across the country, standing up for Sure Start, is so important. Labour councils cant stop the scale of Tory Government cuts, but in many places they are doing their best to protect services and trying new approaches to keep supporting families in difficult circumstances.

Already Labour Councils have given more priority to Sure Start than Conservative Councils - Freedom of Information requests by Labour Friends of Sure Start have found that Labour councils have protected more Sure Starts from closure, whilst more have closed in Tory areas. At the same time the results of Ofsted analysis shows that children's centres in Labour areas receive better Ofsted results too.

But given the challenges of the future, it is even more important for Labour Councillors to be able to share different ideas and ways to protect Sure Start. That is what this pamphlet is all about. Looking at ways to protect those core principles of helping new families by putting children and families at the heart of local services and the community. This doesn't let the Government off the hook - the truth is that we still need a strong national commitment to support Sure Start and deliver solid, sustained investment in the early years. But it does show the extent of Labour's determination even at a tough time for local government to stand up for young families. And so it provides ideas and questions about the best way to reinvigorate the principles behind Sure Start, the core Labour values that underpin it, and how we stand up for children, families and Sure Start in the years to come.



Yvette Cooper



Shadow Childcare Minister Sharon Hodgson

Introduction

Sure Start works. There is now an absolutely compelling evidence base to prove that Children's Centres transform young lives and support families in their moments of greatest need. Which makes it all the more tragic that heartless Government cuts are pushing Sure Start towards a point of no return. Demand for Children's Centre services keeps rising, but remorseless cuts are making it all-but-impossible for Sure Start staff to provide the excellence that families have come to expect.

Last year Barnardo's called on the Government to "*act now to stop the life being squeezed out of Children' Centres.*" Unfortunately the Government did not act. It ignored Barnardo's wise advice and next year threatens to be the most brutal yet for Sure Start.

LFoSS's last two publications focused on the role of central government in developing an ambitious but achievable vision for the future of Sure Start. There can be no doubt that there is still a very real need for such a vision, but with the very survival of Sure Start now in serious doubt, the frontline in the battle for Sure Start is being waged in Town Halls across the country.

Because Councils are so dependent upon central government for their funding, responsibility for Sure Start cuts and closures rests squarely with the government. But Town Halls always have the opportunity to find alternatives to closure. This pamphlet aims to empower Councillors and activists: to show that alternative ideas are out there and to equip them to challenge local authority officers to develop more creative answers to financial pressures than simply closing down Children's Centres.

The pamphlet is divided into two sections: Part One draws upon objective research to show that there is a clear difference between how Labour Councils and Conservative Councils manage Children's Centres. Part Two then explores some of the creative work being undertaken by Labour Councils across the country to safeguard Sure Start services.

This pamphlet is avowedly practical and pragmatic. There is a hugely important role for communities, Councils and staff to campaign together to reverse cuts and to resist Centre closures. But in the meantime Councils have to balance the books and keep services running. This pamphlet seeks to help them do so. Importantly, it doesn't seek to rewrite the book on Sure Start. Quite the opposite – it highlights in very practical terms the good work already going on in communities across the country. Finally this pamphlet doesn't claim to have all the answers – its aim instead is to empower those who are passionate about Sure Start to ask the powerful searching questions which so often inspire radical thinking.

Part One – What a difference a Labour Council makes.

LFoSS wanted to provide an objective analysis of the impact on Sure Start centres of the party in control of the local Council. To this end we collated detailed Freedom of Information responses about Children's Centre services and budgets from every relevant Council in the country. We also analysed every Ofsted report of a Children's Centre. We found a very marked difference between the records of Labour and Conservative Councils on Sure Start.

Not only are Labour councils closing fewer Sure Start Centres, but Children's Centres in Labour-run councils are also more likely to be high quality.

Cuts and closures.

FOI responses received by LFoSS show that, between 2010 and 2015, 763 Children's Centres were closed in England. This amounts to 21% of the previous provision.

Local authorities' Children Centres budgets have been reduced by £1,488,425.60 on average since 2010. Councils reported a 25% average cut in the funds allocated to Sure Start Centres.

On average, Conservative-controlled local authorities closed 5.8 Children's Centres in their areas, whereas Labour Councils closed 4.4 centres.

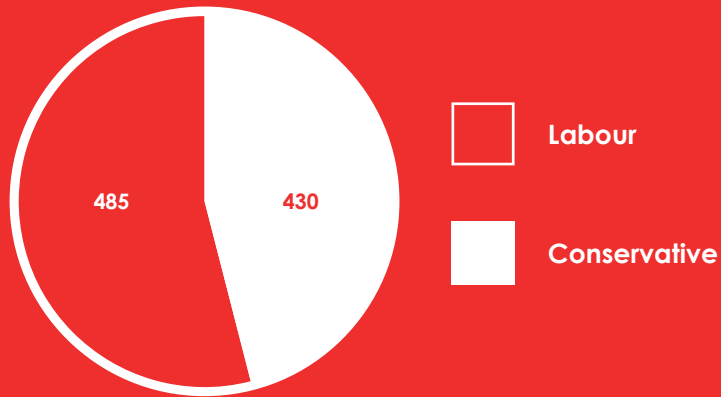
In total, Conservative Councils were responsible for 42 per cent of the closures, whereas Labour Councils have enacted 38 per cent.

Quality of centres.

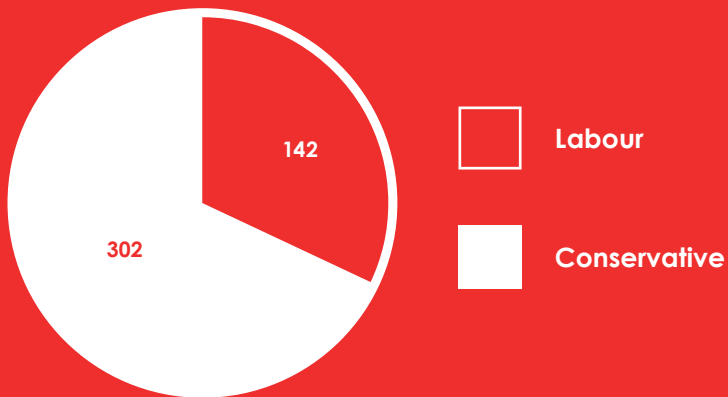
An analysis of all the Ofsted inspections of Children's Centres across the country reveals that those within local authority areas run by Labour are both more likely to be judged outstanding and less likely to be inadequate.

There are 50% more Centres rated outstanding in Labour-run local authority areas than in Tory-controlled areas. The difference is less stark amongst Centres rated good, but Labour areas still perform marginally better - 388 to 365. There are twice as many Centres judged by Ofsted to require improvement in Conservative-run local authorities - 249 compared to 130 in Labour areas. Only 12 Centres in Labour-run local authorities were deemed inadequate whilst there are 53 in Tory areas.

Good or Outstanding Children's Centres



Children's Centre rated Inadequate or Requiring Improvement



**The message is crystal clear:
Labour Councils are protecting
Sure Start, Tory Councils are not.**

More details regarding this study are available at www.laboursurestart.com

Part Two – saving money, saving Sure Start.

LFoSS wanted to understand how Labour Councils have managed to protect Sure Start services far more effectively than Conservative Councils, especially considering the fact that it is Labour Councils which have seen the most brutal cuts to their budgets. We conducted a survey of every Labour Council with responsibility for Sure Start and asked them how they had delivered savings. We then cross-referenced their responses with Freedom of Information data on local authority budget cuts. We found that, although this government's brutal cuts are undoubtedly taking a real and damaging toll on Labour communities, Labour Councils are responding creatively and doubling down on their determination to avoid closing Children's Centres.

On average each Council has been forced to cut spending on Children's Centres by £1.5 million since 2010. In Knowsley the cuts are equivalent to a halving of the Children's Centre budget, in Derby there has been a 67% cut over three years.



A brilliant LFoSS community campaigning workshop

Most Councils responded to the first wave of government cuts by restructuring their Children's Centre service. Combining or reducing management tiers and moving to a locality model with clusters of Centres sharing back office functions were common responses to the cuts imposed by the Coalition Government. Unfortunately, however, the cuts have kept coming and Sure Start has been pushed to the brink. At this point, many Conservative Councils have chosen the administratively easy option of closing Centres. A superb community campaign forced Tory Lincolnshire to abandon plans to close 15 Centres, but Conservative Oxfordshire has shown little inclination to drop their plans to close 36 Centres.

Closing Children's Centres may be easy, but it carries an immense human cost. The much more challenging option is to reform Sure Start further, not just restructuring Children's Centre management and administration but fundamentally reviewing the role of Centres and their place within local authority service delivery. This is the route being taken by innovative Labour Councils across the country.

Based on responses from Labour Councils, the two key opportunities for innovation are Public Health and Early Help. Both offer the chance to save significant amounts of money by reducing duplication, as well as to lever in addition resources and to enhance the Children's Centres offer for children and families.

Councils are still adapting to their new Public Health responsibilities, but there is widespread recognition that Children's Centres have a big role to play. Many Councils are reducing costs by co-locating health teams in Children's Centres. Most commonly these will be Health Visitors, but Plymouth have gone further and co-located staff from Plymouth Hospital Trust.

Other Councils are using Public Health funds to run services from Children's Centres. Like many Councils, Nottinghamshire have used health funding for interventions to promote breastfeeding and good oral health. Again, Plymouth have pioneered policy in this area – working with health colleagues to deliver an integrated support programme to tackle postnatal depression. Through a similar approach, Merton have drawn £300k a year from Public Health funds for use in Children's Centres, whilst Waltham Forest have accessed £1.7m.

The Early Help opportunity is more complex – it does not relate to a standalone budget like Public Health and it is a targeted rather than universal service. Nevertheless, Labour Councils are embracing the chance to integrate Children's Centres with the early intervention strand of children's social care. Wolverhampton have co-located social workers within Children's Centres and in Barking & Dagenham Children's Centre staff deliver the majority of the Troubled Families programme, enabling their salaries to be paid through this budget.

Plymouth have co-located social care Family Support Workers in Children's Centres and are now building upon this by placing Children's Centres at the heart of a new Early Childhood Service. This model will combine the universal offer of Sure Start and coordinated early intervention for families in need and will be anchored in the pooling of budgets.

This pamphlet is too short to do justice to the great wealth of exciting ideas being developed by Labour Councils across the country. Our survey revealed a great many innovative policies to maximise resources and to maintain excellent Children's Centre services. Blackburn have plans to utilise constituted parents groups to lever in external funding. Knowsley operate a superb programme drawing on the power of community volunteers. Waltham Forest are planning to recruit grant-funded childcare apprentices. But it is the opportunities of Public Health and Early Help which stood out as representing the best hope for the future of Sure Start. Both present challenges, but both are relatively well-resourced despite the climate of austerity and both have crystal clear synergies with Children's Centres.

As well as creativity, it will take real determination to secure the future of Sure Start. But based on our survey, Labour Councils have this abundance. Time and again it was clear that Sure Start was consciously being prioritised by Councils because of clear political leadership. In the words of the lead member at Waltham Forest Council: *"We are very proud of the fact that we have not shut one Children's Centre, and we have no plans to do so."* Similarly in Knowsley: *"I'm very proud of our record and am a great advocate of Sure Start Children's Centres. It is something that we as a Labour Party should remind families of everyday."* And in Hammersmith & Fulham: *"We were elected as a Labour administration determined to do everything we can to save our Children's Centres and re-build the original principles of Sure Start."*

If every Labour Councillor embraces this attitude, our survey provides ample evidence that there enough good ideas being put into practice across the country, not just to save Sure Start – but to refashion it, re-energise it and safeguard its long-term future.

Case studies

Co-production in Waltham Forest

- Co-production with families has been key to Waltham Forest's approach to protecting Sure Start. In January 2015, the Council undertook a parents' survey which was designed to understand the current benefits that families obtained from Children's Centre services. Over 850 families responded. It then commissioned focus groups and consulted with individual families to identify the barriers to accessing Children's Centre services which they would work to address through the development of a new model for Sure Start provision. The Council also worked very closely with partner

organisations – conducting four stakeholder and partners workshops over a period of 18 months, two market engagement events and an expert panel bringing together representatives of Children's Centre services from other London Boroughs and voluntary organisations. This demonstrates a truly exceptional commitment to user and stakeholder engagement and should give Waltham Forest's emerging new Sure Start model an excellent chance of success.

Knowsley's Alternative Delivery Models

- Rather than salami-slicing in the face of significant budgetary pressures, Knowsley chose to invest in innovation and prioritise the long-term transformation of Children's Centres. They set out to protect specialised services and to mitigate the risk of Centres closing, but also invested time and energy in developing a positive, unifying vision for Sure Start in their area. Labour councillors were determined to take a bottom-up, collaborative approach to change – they believed it was crucial that local residents should view a new model of service delivery as an opportunity for improvement, rather than merely the result of financial strain. This builds upon their work spinning-off Council youth services to the Knowsley Youth Mutual, an experiment which they believe has been a success – fostering an entrepreneurial spirit and facilitating innovation. The Council's emerging model of Children & Family Hubs has the potential to become an exemplar or how to design and develop Children's Centres fit for the future.



Anne Snelgrove's brilliant Sure Start campaign in Swindon

Conclusion – There is always an alternative

This is a short pamphlet with a simple message: even in these extremely difficult times of austerity there is always an alternative to closing Children's Centres. Not only do better alternatives exist, but Labour Councils across the country are showcasing them. There is a tremendous amount of creative work going on – and a steely resolve in Town Halls to defend these wonderful institutions created by Labour and run down by the Conservative Government.

This mix of innovation and determination is surely the reason why Labour Councils have closed far fewer Children's Centres than Conservative Councils – and why Children's Centres in Labour areas receive significantly better Ofsted reports than Centres in Tory areas.

This pamphlet suggests that a sustainable future for Sure Start will require the integration of Children's Centres and Councils' Public Health and Early Help functions. The main case studies it draws upon also emphasise the real importance of user involvement and the co-design of Sure Start services.

The aim of the pamphlet is to generate discussion. LFoSS hopes to steer this discussion towards the development of a proposed new model for Sure Start which draws upon best practice from across the country and commands strong consensus within both the sector and the Labour Party. We will then make this proposed model one of the pillars of our submission to the government's long overdue consultation on the future of Children's Centres.

We warmly welcome all contributions to this debate and would love to hear your views: please visit www.laboursurestart.com or our Facebook page to let us know your thoughts.

We'd like to sincerely thank all the Councils who took part in this work and we'd like to say a special thanks to Unison for generously supporting this project.

The closure of Children's Centres is never an inevitability. Even in the face of cruel and unfair cuts it is a choice. As a party and a movement – as councillors and activists – we must endeavour to remember that there is always an alternative, and to recall Raymond Williams' wise observation that *"to be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing."*



Shadow Education Secretary Lucy Powell

www.laboursurestart.com