

Families in town hall protest to save Sure Start centres as council bosses deny there will be any closures ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Story online with photos and video of the protest ^[2]

EXCERPTS.

Hundreds of families have protested outside Manchester town hall to try to save 'lifeline' neighbourhood Sure Start children's centres.

Around 300 people -- mainly mums and their children -- gathered in Albert Square waving placards and chanting slogans, demanding centres across the city stay open.

The protest was sparked by Manchester council's decision to cut from the Early Intervention Grant, which funds the centres.

But bosses say they have no intention of closing any of the city's 40 Sure Start facilities -- and instead want to hand them over to schools, voluntary bodies and private companies. Any centres that cannot be outsourced would be scrapped.

Mum-of-one Claire Tomkinson, whose two-year-old son Liam attends Clayton Sure Start centre, led the campaigners and voiced fears that the standard of services could slip if the venues fall into the hands of private companies.

"Everyone is really upset and concerned because we feel these centres are absolutely vital to Manchester and give our children the best start in life," she told the M.E.N.

"Our concern is that private organisations could come in and cut staff numbers, as well as raising nursery fees. Many parents simply would not be able to afford it and the whole city would suffer.

"We understand there needs to be cuts but, to us, it seems like they are going for the most vulnerable. Children should be protected -- this just doesn't seem fair."

Parents from Sure Start centres across the city teamed up for the action. Some of the youngsters were carrying plastic axes and were covered in fake blood -- to show how they were 'bleeding' from the funding cuts.

Council leader Sir Richard Leese attended the demonstration and made a speech but was jeered by some of the crowd, who urged him not to privatise the facilities.

He told them: "We will come to all the centres and talk to you. We will come to every centre to reassure you."

After addressing the audience, he was confronted by mum-of-two Michelle Fernandes.

The 30-year-old, from New Moston, explained how her two-year-old son Lucas was just one of hundreds of children benefiting from Belthorne children's centre in Blackley and expressed fears that experienced staff could be axed.

She said: "It's not just about fighting for the centres to stay open, it's about ensuring staff are kept and can carry on providing the best care for our children.

"I went to Belthorne as a child and it's no exaggeration to say they are helping generations of children and parents. The centre is a necessity."

- reprinted from Manchester Evening News

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