

Mothers march for Sure Start ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Across England, mothers are on the march. Babies in arms and toddlers in tow, they are rising up to save Sure Start.

David Cameron, the prime minister, had pledged to protect the universal service for the under-fives after cross-questioning on website Mumsnet, a ready-made focus group for politicians. But his government's decision to slash grants to councils has left many saying they cannot afford to keep centres open.

On Saturday there will be a mass play protest in a Manchester park. Next week a group of mothers from the city will turn up on Mr Cameron's doorstep as he deals with yet another revolt from Middle England.

Claire Tomkinson, one of the protest leaders, happily admits to being the kind of "sharp-elbowed middle-class" mother Mr Cameron criticised for hogging Sure Start services aimed at the poorest.

But she said she could not imagine what her life would be like without the centre at Clayton, in east Manchester, one of the most deprived communities in the country.

Her son Liam, now two, was born with a rare condition with misaligned limbs that meant he had to wear a full body cast for several months. "People would shout things at us in the street. I felt really isolated. I didn't want to leave the house. If it had not been for the centre I would have got worse and worse."

First she used the cafe and library in the building, but when Liam was able to walk he joined the playgroups and other activities. Mrs Tomkinson, 30, had to give up work because of Liam's condition and the centre has become the focus of her social life.

"You can come in and within a few minutes see someone you know," she said. "Liam doesn't go to nursery so this is his chance to socialise with other children. He is so confident and has learnt to build relationships."

Watching Liam run off to play with staff while his mother conducts her third media interview of the week confirms her point.

She believes eroding Sure Start would once again atomise a fragile community, shrinking society back to the sofa and the TV. "It is the heart of the community. I didn't know anybody but my immediate neighbours before I came here. They are closing the library and the youth centre too. Does the government want us all to stay in our houses?"

She said restricting services to the most vulnerable would prevent them integrating with society. "It would just become stigmatised and no one would come."

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Manchester city council denies it plans to close any centres. But it has decided to make more than 22 million pounds savings over the next two years after government grants were cut. Across children's services, 961 of 2,180 staff are being made redundant.

The Labour-run council believes it can save 10 million by changing from a provider of services to a commissioner. The 36 Sure Start centres are to be handed over to private or voluntary groups. Many services will be restricted only to the most vulnerable.

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- reprinted from the Financial Times

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