

Mothers take Sure Start cuts fight to Downing Street^[1]

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EXCERPTS.

A group of women have used Mother's Day to take their campaign against cuts to Sure Start Children's Centres to Downing Street.

Mothers and their toddlers from local campaigns across England have handed in a 50,000-name petition against cuts and closures of the centres.

Daycare Trust research suggests up to 86% of centres are facing budget cuts and that up to 250 may close in 2011.

But ministers say there is enough money in the system to retain the centres.

They want to refocus the centres to help more disadvantaged families, with health visitors picking up some of their early intervention work.

Nursery rhymes

The Downing Street event has been organised by mothers Louise King and Ruth Hardcastle, who formed the No Cuts for Kids campaign in response to the cuts.

Sure Start Children's Centres are being cut in some places because the grant which funds them was cut by 11% in last year's emergency budget, and again in the comprehensive spending review by almost the same percentage.

Then the government removed the protection from the Sure Start budget. This has left them vulnerable as councils seek to make up losses to their central government grants overall.

As local authorities have set out their plans to reduce budgets, local campaigns have sprung up from parents anxious about losing the services and help they offer to them and their children.

Campaigns represented on Sunday included mothers from Lambeth, Hampshire, Manchester, Camden, Stoke, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kirklees and Derby who collected signatures online and on paper.

After handing their petition in to Number 10, some 30 parents and their children sang nursery rhymes and painted faces.

Organiser Ms King said: "On the day the nation's thoughts turn to mothers and the job they do, we wanted to highlight the devastating impact that these cuts are having on mums and kids everywhere.

"Sure Start Children's Centres are a great leveller in our society. Kids from all walks of life mix and learn together."

"Parents can further their education and gain vital support. Take them away or force them to make cutbacks, and we'll see the next generation really suffer."

The campaign also has the backing of childcare charity Daycare Trust and online parenting website Netmums.

'Bottle of bleach'

Shadow children's minister Sharon Hodgson called for the government to reinstate the ringfence to the Sure Start budget.

She said she knew of some centres that were seeing their budgets reduced from £450,000 to £19,000 a year but still being called Children's Centres.

"This is not enough to fund a children's centre, it would only fund a caretaker and bottle of bleach," she added.

A Department for Education spokesman said: "We have ensured there is enough money in the system to maintain a network of Sure Start Children's Centres, and provided new investment for health visitors.

"Local authorities have a legal duty to provide sufficient children's centre provision for the families in their areas and must consult local communities properly before closing or changing children's centres."

"Good local authorities are restructuring with care and making sensible changes - for example through 'clustering' of centres - so they can continue to provide much-needed services for families, but in a more efficient way."

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