

# Cameron breaks his Sure Start promise <sup>[1]</sup>

20 centres have been closed since May 2010 despite Cameron's promise to protect funding.

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**Source:** New Statesman

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 27 Jul 2011

## EXCERPTS

The day before the general election, among other things, David Cameron pledged to protect Sure Start, the network of children's centres founded by the last Labour government.

Asked for a guarantee that the centres would continue to receive funding, he replied: "Yes, we back Sure Start. It's a disgrace that Gordon Brown has been trying to frighten people about this. He's the prime minister of this country but he's been scaring people about something that really matters."

Based on this answer, many reasonably assumed that Sure Start, like the NHS and foreign aid, would be ring-fenced from George Osborne's £83bn spending cuts. Indeed, at Prime Minister's Questions on 2 March 2011, Cameron told the House of Commons that Sure Start funding was protected and that "centres do not need to close".

Freedom of information requests by the New Statesman to the Department for Education, however, have found that 20 of the centres have closed since May 2010, including seven in Redbridge, three in Bromley, and two in Knowsley. The department was unable to tell us how many would close by 2015 but the figures suggest that hundreds will be shut down by the end of this parliament.

The reason for the closures is that, contrary to Cameron's protestations, Sure Start funding is not protected. Shortly after the coalition came to power, the budget for the centres was amalgamated into a new "early intervention grant", which also includes funding for programmes related to teenage pregnancy, mental health and youth crime. These programmes received nearly £2.8bn in 2010-2011 but, this year, they will receive £2.2bn - a real-terms cut of 22.4 per cent.

In an act of reverse redistribution, it is the poorest areas that will be hardest hit. Funding for Sure Start and related programmes is being cut by an average of £50 a child across England this year.

In some of the poorest areas of the country, including Tower Hamlets, Hackney, and Knowsley (where centres have already been closed), it is being cut by £100 a year. By contrast, in wealthier areas, such as Richmond, Buckinghamshire and Surrey, the cuts will amount to just £30 a child.

For a government that is ostensibly committed to social mobility to refuse to protect Sure Start is remarkable. Policymakers have long looked to schools and universities to narrow class differences but neuroscientists have since shown that the early years, when brain development is at its most rapid, offer the best chance to improve the life chances of the poorest.

Scandinavian countries, which have invested heavily in children's services for decades, now enjoy the highest rates of social mobility in the world. Tony Blair's decision to launch Sure Start in 1998 was an enlightened attempt to emulate that success. The current Prime Minister must explain, for the first time, why the coalition government is destroying this legacy.

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