

# **Sure Start Children's Centres: Twenty Years On (1998-2018)**

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# STOP START

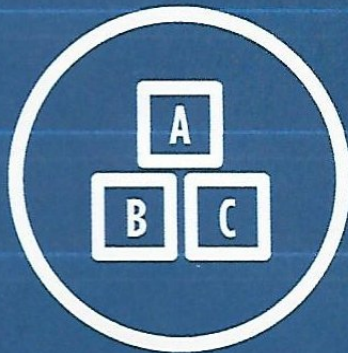
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## Survival, decline or closure? Children's centres in England, 2018

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# Timeline1: 1998-2010

- 1998 HMT Treasury: Comprehensive Spending Review on Services for Children under 8 (Norman Glass, Chair).
- 1999-2002: Sure Start Local Programme 250 area based projects (SSLPs) in disadvantaged areas, later doubled to 500 areas.
- 2003: *Every Child Matters*
- 2004: *Choice for parents: the best start for children* set a target of 3,500 centres by 2010
- 2005: Shift from local projects to 'children's centres' with overall local authority control but with ring fenced national funding
- 2006: *Childcare Act 2006* required local authorities to provide sufficient childcare places
- 2010: At its probable zenith, children's centre programme had 3600 centres – no longer mainly for disadvantaged areas but near universal.



# Children's Centres 2009/10

Table 1: National distribution of children's centres by phase and area disadvantage (August 2009)

Level of Disadvantage	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Highest 30%	1036	93.0%	849	49.0%	67	8.5%	1952	53.7%
Lowest 70%	78	7.0%	884	51.0%	718	91.5%	1680	46.3%
Total	1114		1733		785		3632	

Source: *Together for Children* database (for DfES) August 2009. Area disadvantage score based on national Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>7</sup>

# Timeline2: 2010-2018

- After 2010: Much greater emphasis on local decision making – that is by the local authorities rather than central government
- 2011: National ring fenced budget ended: funding moved to the Early Intervention Grant (EIG).
- 2013: New statutory guidance on the ‘core purpose’ of children’s centres; shift to more targeting of families in greatest need, on parenting skills as well as child development and school readiness ..
- 2013: Requirement to provide full daycare and qualified teachers in the most disadvantaged areas dropped
- 2015: Regular Ofsted inspections of children’s centres suspended, awaiting further guidance from central government on their core purpose
- 2016?: DfE minister announces consultation/review of Sure Start Children's Centre but no action to date
- 2018: National Audit Office report estimates that from 2010-2016 ‘spending on Sure Start fell by 49.8%’ (*The financial sustainability of local authorities*, NAO, 2018)
- 2018 :Minister for Children and Families confirms the importance of children’s centres to the government’s early education and social mobility strategies (Select Committee of Science and Technology, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

# National Evaluation of Children's Centres (ECCE) 2009-2015

National sample of centres in disadvantaged areas: centre provision, staffing, management and 'reach'; longitudinal survey of 2600 children and their families who had used a centre

Started at high point of the programme in 2009/10 but clear that after 2012 the national programme was contracting, with centres being reorganised and services reduced or 'hollowed out'.

Several positive findings on the effects of children's centres:

- a better home learning environment (this is linked to better child outcomes at school age)
- a less chaotic home life
- improved mothers' mental health, and better relationships between parents and children
- children, whose families had used children's centres services when they were toddlers, showed lower levels of behaviour problems when they were three years compared to families who used fewer services

# Stop Start Study 2017-8

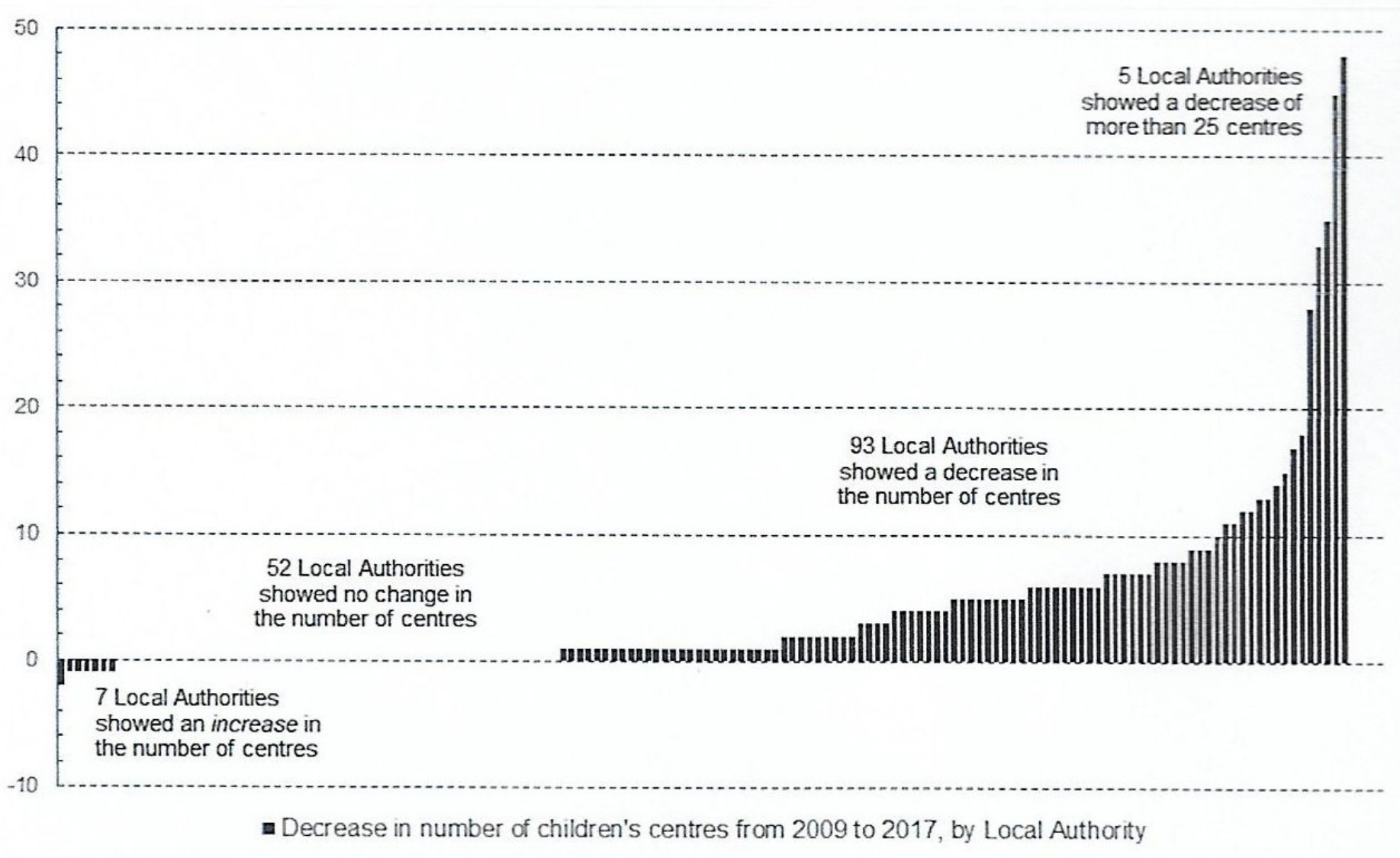
- Aim to find out what has happened to the Children's Centre programme in England
- Small scale study using
  - official data sources for 'headline count' numbers
  - a survey of all 152 local authorities in England (response rate 82%)
  - six area case studies
- Strong evidence that many authorities retain a high commitment to children's centres, despite budget cuts and other pressures
- But very large variation in how they have responded.

# The Headline Count

- ‘Headline count’ generates confusion and controversy, partly because it is no longer clear what constitutes a ‘children’s centre’.
- Official figures clearly lag the real world and may not reflect closures announced locally.
- Where a physical centre has closed, authorities may view grants to local groups as an equivalent alternative.
- Though there is still at least one children’s centre in every LA in England there is an overall reduction in the number of centres by at least 16% and maybe more like 30% if a tougher definition of a ‘registered’ centre is used. More closures are certainly in the pipeline.
- The proportion of centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas has remained constant but the numbers have dropped as they have everywhere.
- There are very large variations across local authorities.



Figure 1: Total children's centre closures for each local authority, 2009-2017



Source: TFC database 2009 and Edubase October 2017

# Children's Centres Services in 2017: Key Findings

- More centres operating on a part time basis only
- A smaller range of services is now being offered. 55% of authorities stated the level of services had been reduced
- Some areas had distributed specific services and staffing across different centres requiring users to go there.
- Much more emphasis on services for referred or high need families
- Fewer open access groups though centres still continue to offer some open access services.
- Some areas have increased the age range covered significantly
- Centres are increasingly clustered into groups or a main centre with satellites or 'locations' elsewhere.
- In some areas centres have been tucked under local nursery or primary schools and in others linked to area teams for high need families and children aged 0-18.

# Drivers of Change

- 84% of local authorities stated that financial pressures were the main drivers of these changes.
- And 80% also saw 'change of focus' as being critical, particularly targeting high need families and linking centres into a wider package of 'early help'
- 73% of local authorities still managed all or most of their centres; 15% were managed by local schools; 11% by voluntary organisations; in only two areas was the private sector a major player
- These changes move children's centres away from the original idea of an open access neighbourhood base with links to more specialised services.
- The overall programme is now not just a post-code lottery of your local children's centre has closed, but also what type of service and access is provided at centres that survive.

# Recommendations

- Long promised review of children's centres provision should be completed.
- Central purpose of children's centres to promote positive development of children and families primarily for the 0-5 age group should be confirmed.
- Shifting the balance too far towards referred families and linking centres into provision aimed at a much wider age group of high need families and children, does not fit well with the label of a local children's centre.
- A national register which sets minimum levels of provision to be included, should be maintained.
- Once the review is completed then regular inspections of centres should be re-established.