

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

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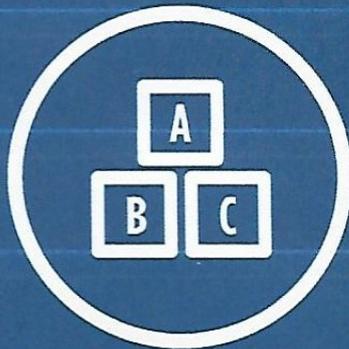
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STOP START

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 Deprivation⁷

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 1st 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

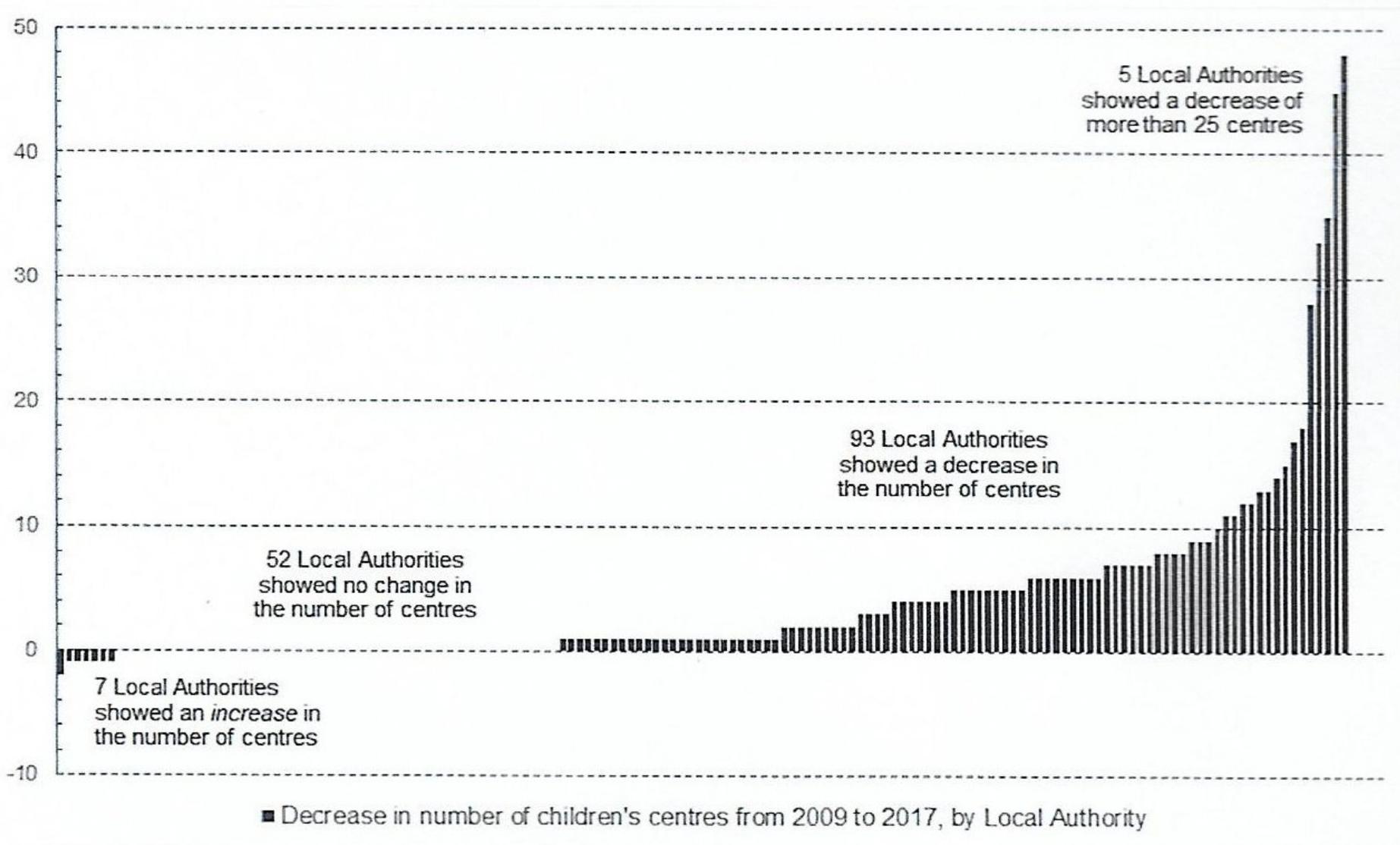
Stop Start Study 2017-8

- 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.