

Section A: Summary



UNISON Suffolk County surveyed its members about the Public Consultation into Children's Centre redesign which closed 1 March 2020.

Suffolk County Council's redesign will result in **cuts to more than half** of the county's remaining children's centres. The opening hours of 11 centres will reduce, while another 11 will close entirely. This means 22 out of 38 children's centres are facing cuts, a devastating prospect for Suffolk's children and families.¹

The UNISON national position is against the closure of children's centres and this is totally devastating for the workers and children and their families who use the services.

In May 2019 UNISON gathered its members' views in respect of Suffolk County Council's redesign of the 0-19 Healthy Child Service redesign. Many of our members work in children's centres and continue to be negatively affected by this redesign, and these children's centre proposals will impact on them further.

UNISON's key questions:

The Family Hubs have an extended offer for families (0-19) including mental health support for young people:

- What staff will be delivering these services (job roles)?
- What services and groups have already been cut from centres?
- What training and development will be offered to staff to cover such a wide age range?
- How are these services going to be funded?
- What is the evidence base for the Family Hub model?
- Which of these services are already part of the 0-19 healthy child contract?
- Has the council done an impact assessment on community cohesion and the risks of removing universal early years activities?
- What evidence does the council have that people will engage with the outreach services or mental health interventions that are being proposed?
- Will any universal services be offered to families with children aged 0-5?
- When will the staff consultation begin (as this will change our staff working conditions especially for those delivering services in a range of community buildings)?

UNISON is extremely concerned about the impact these proposals will have on its members who work in children's centres, disabled members, on women and on families with children 0-5.

¹ Two of Suffolk's 38 centres would close completely should these proposals go ahead, with a further nine repurposed to provide childcare (so closed as children's centres). The remaining 27 centres would become Family Hubs, though 11 will only operate part-time.

Section B: Cuts disguised as improved services?

Since September 2019, staff based in existing centres have been required to deliver the 0-19 healthy child programme. UNISON is concerned this proposal is actually disguising a reduction in services to families with children in the vital early years of development, and a cessation of universal children's centre services for children 0-5.

It is pleasing that nine new day nurseries are being proposed but these will not be a like-for-like replacement for universal early years services that a children's centre can provide.

The proposal states that the hubs will provide toddler groups, advice from partner agencies, youth groups, work for excluded pupils, and mental health access for young people up to the age of 19.

Giving every child the best start in life means providing lifeline services such as children's centres to help parents and boost child development. The *Marmot report 10 years on* (published February 2020)² finds investment in these vital services has gone backwards in the past decade and this lines up with what UNISON members' direct experience.

The report makes the following recommendation, "**Improve availability and quality of early years services, including Children's Centres, in all regions of England.**"

Following a decade of government cuts to lifeline services like Sure Start Children's Centres, and benefits that families rely on. This latest Marmot report delivers a devastating judgement and reaffirms the value of universal children's centres for all 0-5 year olds.

One of our members told us:

"I would like to echo the comments from Neil Bland [UNISON Suffolk County Branch Secretary]: I want Unison members '... working with children and young people in Suffolk to have the relevant job roles, training, qualifications and experience to work with a particular age group.'

We want government to provide Suffolk County Council with significant additional funding so there are more staff with the relevant experience to work children and young people. I am very concerned that this public consultation is happening before the relevant funding is confirmed, and before the government legislation on Family Hubs is in place.'

Winston Dorsett, UNISON Regional Organiser for the Eastern Region and former social worker said:

"Suffolk County Council's proposals seem like a desperate attempt to close universal children's centres and to stretch already limited resources and over worked staff to cover an even wider age range of children and young people with high needs."

Currently there's no legislation about Family Hubs in place to guide local authorities what they should deliver, or any clarity about how government will fund local authorities to deliver them. UNISON's suspicion is that there is no additional funding coming from central government for these Family Hubs, and this proposal is simply a way of sugar coating the closure of remaining Sure Start Children's Centres to all early years children and families."

Quotes from members:

"The children's centres are vital for first line child protection, let alone family contact sessions in a child friendly environment."

² *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*, cites the detrimental effect of significant funding cuts for Sure Start and Children's Centres, and other children's services, particularly in more deprived areas.

"The Suffolk Children's centres have already been under considerable strain due to the Suffolk Health reorganisation. This further consultation with possible closures is creating additional stress and uncertainty both to the staff and the families the centres support."

"Limited thought has been put into outreach services and some of the findings are factually incorrect about early years provision. This will be detrimental to families and the lack of staffing an provision will mean hard to reach families are less visible and Suffolk is at risk of further serious case reviews as not sharing information with early help and social care on the same system creates massive risks."

"Children centres are there to help and support families throughout the county, the dedication and determination in the delivery of the service from staff is outstanding. They are passionate about what they are doing to support their local community. It will be a huge disappointment to see them repurposed or closed.

"Some families use the centres as that is all they have, it helps them build a relationship with their family and others around the community. At present they work really well, when you look at school holidays parents struggle to find things to do with their children, so just having a place they can go to and let their children enjoy and achieve is helping children to develop and build relationships. And having groups such as baby massage, nutrition sets them in the right path before the child reaches 1."

"Whilst this proposal is not affecting staffing, the previous service redesign did. There are many less services available and children's centres are not the bustling centres they used to be."

"The service provided to the families in the most important time of their lives of their children is essential to the child's development and in the long term will prevent other costly services having to be provided if the family network fails. Early intervention rather than repairing the cracks with plasters at a later date."

Section C: UNISON's response to the public consultation

Question 1 Please tell us who you are. Write your answer in the box. For example, you might be a parent or work for Suffolk County Council.

UNISON is one of the UK's largest trade unions, with 1.3 million members. We represent staff who provide public services in the public and private sector. UNISON Suffolk County is the local branch that represents members who work for Suffolk County Council.

Question 2 Please tell us your post code. We will not use this information to find out who you are or where we live.

UNISON Suffolk County covers employers across the county of Suffolk.

Question 3 Please tell us how you found out about our plan to change services. Was it Facebook, Twitter or something else?

From Suffolk County Council.

Question 4 Please tell us which Children's Centre you go to or have been to.

UNISON has members in children's centres across Suffolk. Our members have also used children's centres or are current users of centres.

Question 5 Which day or days of the week do you go to a Children's Centre? And do you go in the morning or afternoon?

N/A

Question 6 Please tell us if you go to a Children's Centre that happens in another place. For example in a church hall or community centre.

N/A

Question 7 Do you think our plan to run services from Family Hubs is a good idea?

No UNISON doesn't think the Family Hub Model is a good idea, due to the lack of additional funding for service to children, young people and their families 0 - 19.

Sample of comments from our members:

“Children's centres are an essential resource for social cohesion in communities.”

“The loss of the universal aspect of Children's Centres prevents those not identified previously as vulnerable from accessing face to face services easily. Call-centre based triage reduces assessment to a tick list rather than a holistic assessment. Time and money invested in these centres gives a real chance for proactive services. Research has endorsed their value in prevention of health and social issues that are costly to families later.

“I am concerned that the children's centres role in bringing community together and ensuring well-being of children will be jeopardised by the changes. I am also concerned that if contacts with families are reduced this could lead to more instances of missed opportunities to safeguard children or to identify domestic abuse between parents.”

“If there is a gap in development for when children start school we need to be giving children and their families the best start. To give families the best start there needs to be somewhere to go and access support that is for all families. The amount of facilities the centres offer and ways to ask for help or support as your child and children grow up I don't know where else I would have gone to access the help and support if they weren't there or for my friends and what I would tell them to do.”

Question 8 Do you think our plan to run services from PartTime Family Hubs and Outreach is a good idea

No UNISON doesn't think the PartTime Family Hub Model is a good idea.

Our member quotes:

“Children Centre's are a vital service for families. Current proposals will lead families isolated. A family hub will not be able to cope with demand of all elements.”

“Poorer families with young children in rural locations, who rely heavily on the support available from children's centres. Without access to a universal offer for families, and with the imminent closure of two of these centres there is a real worry that families across Suffolk will lose access to a service they desperately need and opportunities for early intervention and prevention.”

“One commissioned children Centre (Highfield) has had no visit from SCC and no contact on proposals. The valuable work that goes on unrecognised. When SCC are supporting wellbeing they are already neglecting staff and families in their proposals. A short sighted

action which will have a detrimental effect long term and moves away from the early intervention."

Question 9 Do you think our plan to run Outreach services in different places outside towns is a good idea – put a mark in the box

No UNISON doesn't think the outreach services are a good idea and more thought is needed.

"The outreach aspect needs to consider staff safety if visiting homes especially in support and training for them. Other activities held in external venues need to be safe and appropriate for the age groups using them."

"I am concerned because I know of at least one parish council that was not consulted about the proposal for activities to transfer to their premises and read about it in the SCC consultation pack!"

"Negotiating regular access to village halls, churches and other community buildings is challenging already. Will staff have to spend time travelling, carrying out risk assessments and transporting, setting up and packing resources? This valuable time could be spent working with families in a centre."

Question 10 Is there anything else you would like to tell us? - please write in the box

UNISON thinks there is insufficient evidence to suggest the Family Hub model will work, how it will be staffed or how it will be paid for.

We are concerned about how this proposal will impact on staff with disabilities as they will be required to work out of multiple locations and to set up and clear away resources.

These proposals will result in the end of universal services for 0-5 year olds, whilst delivering services to a wider range of vulnerable families which may damage community cohesion and reduce the opportunities for staff to intervene early to prevent more costly interventions later on in a child's life.

The early years is a time for early interventions that can impact positively throughout a child / young person's life. We are particularly concerned that this will impact negatively on women's health and wellbeing as maternal mental health issues (post-natal depression) can impact people from all backgrounds not just those classed as "vulnerable" in society.

Question 11 Do you think our changes to services will help more children and families?

No UNISON doesn't think this will help more children.

"Many people from different backgrounds come to the children centres under the pretence of going to a group ,to only then reveal post natal depression , abuse and even had Rapewithout these places I know these people will be lost and will not be a good thing . We are helping people before it's too late take that away spells disaster.

"Health visitors are now a hub so not a drop in midwives hard to get hold off where r these

desperate new parents who have a baby screaming non stop supposed to go if children centres did not exist.”

“If you wait till a child is seen at a school or nursery you are missing the most vulnerable years in a new parent’s life. These are real people with real feelings who have real problems from losing a child to not coping with a child. But also other family members also need support.”

“How does this affect support and information officers [now healthy child advisers] and also staff with disabilities? Very concerned that are job roles are turning in to more advanced health roles and having to use health systems but are money is not being reflected to show this we are supposed to be grateful we have got a job and do it for love even though we now get paid less than supermarket staff yet expected to have more responsibilities.”

“A disastrous proposal. Without the support and professionalism, knowledge and care from the Centres, many families will struggle.”

“Children's centres are a vital source of support to families. They provide information/knowledge to those without family nearby or those with difficult family situations.”

“CHILDREN CENTRES PROVIDE A VITAL SERVICE WHICH WILL NO LONGER BE AVAILABLE FOR PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN”

Question 12 We need to close two of our Children’s Centre buildings – these are Woodbridge and Chatterbox in Ipswich. Will this make a difference to you?

No UNISON doesn't agree with the closure of children's centres. Although we think the Woodbridge centre might find a new location that is not as expensive to use as the current site that is privately rented. This is a vital service to families who live in Woodbridge.

Quotes from our members:

“Closing the children’s centres is unbelievably short-sighted. Problems will just be unresolved, stored, and later explode in adolescence.”

“I have worked with people employed in children’s centres and am aware that once facilities and resources have gone they are very difficult to replace - wasting a huge amount of money, not to mention the skills and experience of staff. PLEASE DO NOT ALLOW THE CLOSURE OF ANY MORE CHILDRENS CENTRES AND DO ALL YOU CAN TO SUPPORT THEM.”

“These children’s centres are a life line for some families. Offering support they don’t get elsewhere. If they are closed all that extra worry of being a parent and the questions like is this normal for my child, is this a cold or something more will fall onto other professionals. What about all the learning that is done at them with the groups they offer, children mixing & learning right from wrong, it will just push it forward to the schools with children attending school with less skills, pressure on them again. What about families that don’t have a friendship group or family around them to support, the parents who feel low & the only thing they go to and socialise is the groups at the centre, this impact on their mental health will also impact on the child. Thanks.”

“These Centres are a vital lifeline and service to families in their local communities, some of whom are vulnerable and in need of additional support, especially in rural locations, where transport links are poor. The County Council needs to think carefully about what the impact

of these closures will have on the families further down the line - will it cost more in the future to deal with issues that might have been identified and actioned had they been able to access a children's centre.

"I work in a role where I visit children and families at home and am acutely aware of the impact closures have, particularly for the most vulnerable."

"I feel passionate about these centres as I know how much they helped me and my family and through my work I continue to see the help they give to families."

"If you close children's centres where are the more disadvantaged families going to go for educational play sessions and parental support? Rich families can pay for this but as usual the poorest suffer. What do you think the affect will be of this long term?

I think:

- More isolation leading to worsening of parental mental health
- The poorest children not having a safe educational centre in which to play and learn, leading to poorer educational outcomes later in life.
- Less socialisation for the children - isolated families rely on children's centres as somewhere children can practice and learn social skills
- Less community - families often meet at children's centres and become friends with people who live locally to them. Where can they do this without a free centre to attend?"

Question 13 We want to use 9 of our buildings to run nursery services for small children but not call them Children's Centre's. Will this make a difference to you?

Maybe UNISON thinks that additional childcare provision will benefit our members.

However, childcare is either government funded or funded by the parents who pay a provider for the childcare. Using the children's centres to provide childcare will help working parents to access childcare but it will not plug that gap of universal support services that are currently delivered by a childcare provider.

UNISON feels it is better for government to adequately fund childcare, children's centres and youth services rather.

Question 14 We want to run some Outreach services from community buildings. Will this make a difference to you?

Yes

This will necessitate changes to UNISON's members working conditions that we require formal consultation with our members in relation to travel, setting up and packing away of equipment, staff required to book venues and take equipment.

Member quote:

Children's centres "are more inclusive in the sense that people can choose to use them, as opposed to "outreach" only being available for those identified as 'needing' them."

Question 15 How good do you think our changes will be

Not good

UNISON members do not think these changes will be good for the families of Suffolk or the staff that work in the centres who have already been through a significant restructure as a result of the 0-19 healthy child programme.

Question 16 Do you agree with Family Hubs, Part-Time Hubs and Outreach services?

No UNISON doesn't agree with these proposals.

UNISON Suffolk County believes that children's centres should be designated as support for families in the early years, with professional well trained staff equipped to provide services to this particular age range. While the idea of providing only services to vulnerable families with a wider age range of children sounds attractive UNISON has concerns as to how its members will cope with the levels of demand, the wider age range (not only from a health perspective) but in terms of activities for young people and outreach which requires travel and packing up and moving resources to various community buildings.

UNISON members are concerned that the universal aspect of these services is being removed and that critical opportunities to intervene early with families who have young children will be missed.

"We are due to go to a hub which is on the edge of town hard to get to unless you have car and quite a walk for residents across other side of town."

"Using outreach is ok for those who cannot get in but to close the centre then to hire another building cannot be saving money."

"I feel management have no idea what we are doing how busy we are they said they would come and see us all but nothing."

"I am also worried the parents in our area will not attend the meeting arranged as they are all in the East Ipswich Woodbridge Lowestoft and none over in the west of the county so unless they use the online service to view their issues our parents will not be heard."

"Working in Children's Centre Services I can see first hand the need to preserve this open access to all families. We find people walking into the centre asking for help and we know providing simple levels of help and advice stop things from escalating resulting in a need for further services. We preserve the independence and dignity of families and promote successfully the self solutions approach."

Question 17 Please tell us anything else you think we should be doing. We'd like to hear your ideas about services for children and families

UNISON would urge the council to rethink its proposals on changing children's centres to family hubs until there is greater clarity around the funding and government legislation for this model as well as more evidence about the benefits. The old Family Centre model tended to focus on only the most vulnerable families and did not encourage community cohesion and also stigmatised particular families. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are significant funding pressures this proposal feels like using what limited funds are available and stretching them even further.

"Our families are not happy about new timetable no groups for some children. We have built up our group's recently and have good attendance and we pick up on struggling families at these groups and this is where we then support them for a range of issues."

"I work in a fairly rural children's centre I am worried about our jobs we don't know what is happening we feel things have already been decided they ask for our thoughts but don't seem to respond or listen satisfactorily."

Also our job role is more involved and they keep adding more and more to it and now a lot more admin because of the failure of the Business Hub to do job properly but we do not get pay rise or band change I feel we should be band five for what we do."

"I cannot get increase as I am at top of my NHS band and have been for a while so cannot progress unless I retrain in another job. They say our jobs are safe but then say consultations might change this. We are very scared and worried."

"We are stretched now as people on long term sick it's only a matter of time before those picking up the extra work will be stressed and off sick."

D) Closing remarks

UNISON believe that an important aspect of the public consultation is for these comments to be acted upon by Suffolk County Council, not only to protect the welfare of staff and retain the skills necessary to provide positive outcomes for service users, but to avoid discrimination of both staff and service users and meet legislative requirements.

If you have any questions about this document, please direct them to UNISON Suffolk Branch at suffolkcounty@btconnect.com