

# Staff Say: Save Our Centres



Results from UNISON Eastern's  
survey of Suffolk children's  
centre staff during May 2020.

**UNISON**  
*Eastern*



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## Introduction

On 14 July 2020, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet looks set to approve plans to cut services at 22 of its remaining 38 children’s centres. Eleven are having their opening hours reduced and another 11 will no longer operate as children’s centres.

Opposition to the service redesign has been widespread, with parents, staff and councillors all raising concerns since the plans were first mooted last year. The process was put on hold, first because of the general election, then because of the coronavirus pandemic. However, the council informed UNISON at the end of April that it was continuing with the process.

UNISON has kept in close contact with staff at the centres to make sure their voices are heard during this process. UNISON members in the children’s centres were surveyed at the end of May and encouraged to pass the survey on to non-members. Children’s centre staff are overwhelmingly against the changes suggested in February’s consultation.

More than four in five (81%) agree with the statement that the Council’s proposals would be ‘devastating for the staff and children who use the services.’

Just 5% believe the Council has carried out enough research into how centres are used to make the changes. The vast majority think the changes will have a negative impact on services, particularly harming Suffolk’s most vulnerable children and families.

The coronavirus has had an enormous impact on children’s centres — they are currently closed with staff attempting to provide



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services online. We don't yet fully know what the impact of the virus will be on the centres and the services they can provide, but it is very likely there will be more families that need children's centres.

The results of that survey are presented here, along with a sample of the responses received.

Children's centre staff think that Suffolk County Council should pause the redesign process until it can properly assess what is needed.

We urge the Council to listen to them.

**Winston Dorsett**

UNISON Eastern regional organiser  
June 2020



## Enough research?

Just 4% of children's centre staff believe the council carried out enough research into how children's centres are currently used before deciding on what to change.

Staff do not feel that the amount, or the quality, of research has been adequate. They feel that the public consultation happened very quickly, not necessarily in the places that would be most affected, and that the questionnaires didn't capture everyone's views appropriately.

They feel that the formal nature of the consultation may not have been appropriate in gathering the views of the service users, as the parents and carers using the centres are not always confident in voicing their needs and wants, particularly outside of the relationships of trust and safety that they have built within the centres.

A key concern was a feeling that the research focused on quantitative rather than qualitative data. Many feel that each centre runs differently, according to local requirements, and because so much of their role is preventative they see and hear so much more than can be captured and logged on paper.

The staff feel that not enough work has gone into asking them what they think about their centres, and feel that the decision-makers do not fully understand what their work entails, and what the needs of the local areas are.

Some pointed to the 2019 restructure, which changed the model and services offered in children's centres to a more health-focused approach, citing feedback they had received from families



who are struggling to adjust to those changes already, and are consequently concerned about the impact of even more change.

Rather than shaking up services again, staff suggested the Council should have focused on promoting the use of the children's centres and developing local offers through local consultation with parents and carers.

**Do you feel Suffolk County Council has carried out enough research into how Children's Centre services are currently being used before deciding what they wanted to change?**

■ No. Each children's centre is unique and each has its own strengths. As far as I understand, only a very few centres were briefly visited and this doesn't give anywhere near a picture of what each children's centre offers. The decision to close/repurpose/become part-time seems largely to be a financial one.

■ No - centres and groups have not been visited to see how we operate, not enough research has been made into out-reach areas which we can work out of - how appropriate they are, the cost, that families are even willing to go there.

■ Although I am sure SCC has carried out their research on these matters I feel as though the majority of this has been done with figures and statistics. Whereas working front of house within a children's centre you see/hear so much more than can be captured and logged ... Early intervention is paramount. Families living in rural settings are as much vulnerable as the families living next door to a centre.

■ No. The pandemic has naturally overtaken everything else so even media publicity has not happened. Many families are still unaware, and staff have lost track too as one of my colleagues told me this week



■ No. We very recently (September 2019) changed the model and services being offered in children’s centres to a health-focused approach. Feedback from families I have received personally is that they have been struggling to adjust to the changes already (significantly fewer groups, for example). I know for myself, and other staff members, it has also been a difficult adjustment at times. I don’t believe enough time had passed to allow any meaningful research to be carried out before widespread lockdown began and our services have had to change and adapt again. It is also a huge unknown at this time how and when more ‘normal’ services will resume, and what this will look like for staff and families. I believe these changes are being driven by financial restraints, rather than what is best for the families we support.

■ I did but I now think that recent circumstances could change things going forward

■ No. I feel that no lessons have been learned from the previous restructure where staff and families alike were clear and reasoned in their argument around, for eg, the closure of Quayside. This has since been proven to be a costly mistake as predicted yet here we go again.



## Impact of Covid-19

It hardly needs saying that Covid-19 is having an unprecedented impact on life in Britain. However, it doesn't seem to have affected Suffolk County Council's plans for children's centres.

The staff are extremely concerned about it and how the aftermath will affect the services they provide, how they are provided, and who will access them.

They say the redesign proposals need to be postponed until the impact of the pandemic is better understood, pointing out that no-one knows what 'normal' will look like once lockdown restrictions are lifted. Many think it is impossible to know at this stage whether the redesign proposals will need to be altered to suit the likely changes in society.

While the 'new normal' may be unclear, many are concerned that there will be more families needing support than ever before, because of contracting income, possible rising unemployment and even homelessness.

And staff have plenty more questions that need to be considered. If social distancing measures are in place long term, how will this be managed with the available space in centres, especially if centres become part-time, or are closed altogether?

How will the highest standards of cleanliness be maintained in external outreach venues?

Can the council guarantee that service providers relying heavily on government funding will be able to continue, given the predicted economic impact of the pandemic?



There are also concerns about the impact the pandemic will have on how services are delivered as throughout the lockdown period staff have been working remotely, providing services online.

## **Tell us if you think the Covid19 pandemic will have an impact on the children's centre redesign**

■ I think Covid-19 will possibly impact families negatively. And therefore the fallout following the pandemic will be more families needing support and therefore [the Children and Young People Service will] become in more demand.

■ With more families struggling, and needing extra support I feel they will be more sought after.

■ No - I think the fact we have been working hard to deliver the service remotely will only support their view that we don't need to operate out of a centre. In reality we are not seeing children, parents can easily tell us what we want to hear and it is harder to use professional judgement.

■ Yes, as it will take time for families to feel confident about coming back to the centres, and data will be low at this time which they will use saying there is not enough foot fall

■ I have not seen any evidence to suggest that there has been any consideration of the Covid situation or that any of the proposals have been changed to take account of the threat or the potential changes we may need to make to our services as a result.

■ I feel, unfortunately due to this pandemic that we must not change anything building/hours wise. Although groups will be slow to start up again due to lack of confidence in the public, our services are going to go out of the roof. Homelessness,



low income, job losses, depression, break ups, domestic violence, child neglect etc the list goes on. So I hope SCC will have this in mind before closing any buildings or making any part time. I feel that we will need extended hours and offer more services to help/support/counsel etc all in this pandemic. This will take years to get over.

■ I'm hoping that we may need to keep buildings open for Early Help use as the existing centres may be limited with available safe space

■ Absolutely. The services have already changed dramatically, twice, for our families in the last six months, once due to service re-modelling and once due to Covid-19. We support families who are already vulnerable and whose lives are often already chaotic, and so I believe that asking them to continue to make adjustments could potentially have a massive and untold effect on them mentally, emotionally and socially.

■ I think one of the key fundamentals of parenting is the struggles affect ALL, not just poor or particular groups. People will realise more than ever the need for support and will need someone to come.



## Level of services

A massive 83% of staff thought the redesign would negatively affect the services centres provide.

They are concerned about the impact repurposing and closures will have, especially on rural communities.

And they feel that those who do not have their own transport and are reliant on public transport, or who have to travel long distances, will be disadvantaged.

Centre staff warn that the reach of the service will be reduced, and feel that parents and carers who may have dropped in for advice and support will no longer be able to access centres, leading to increased feelings of isolation, and the danger of these families slipping through the net.

### **How do you feel closing or repurposing existing children's centres will affect the services you provide?**

■ Disastrous - people attending the different sessions - loads of people wanting the service. To lose it would be awful. Staff all know about all the families - babies through to school age - build up relationships

■ I actually agreed with a lot of the initial plans, although I feel outreach services are a lot more difficult to set up than anticipated. But with possible more demand in future and less centres this may need to be reconsidered.

■ I think we will still carry out our targeted groups. It's a shame the smaller CCs will close as some families do not have transport to go to the ones that will remain open.



■ Many families are struggling managing children's behaviour. Children are now not used to going out to socialise. Social anxiety will be at an all time high as children have to learn to be around others. Behaviour will be affected which will impact on parents' mental health and exacerbate other issues such as drug use and domestic abuse. I see in my 7 month old grand-daughter that she's now accustomed to viewing people from a distance. When I'm able to pick her up she'll be overwhelmed.

■ Massively. The centre where I work will be repurposed. There is nothing else in this area for parents who don't have a car. Groups will stop activity holiday sessions and baby massage.

■ I am very sad at this change. I consider re-purposing really means they are closing. I do consider that the most disadvantaged families will suffer most but we also undertake a lot of universal support which I feel keeps families buoyant and out of the Social Care Arena by providing an initial support level that empowers families to self solve their needs and challenges.

■ We may be busier as other centres will close however I feel we will be letting some families slip through the net because we are only targeting certain families.

■ Families will have less opportunity to attend Children Centre groups which are needed especially for a new mum who is experiencing life with a small baby for the first time and needs support, help, guidance and interaction with other parents in a safe, clean environment. This can only be achieved satisfactorily face to face and not by just assessing numerous websites, facebook pages etc. Also some parents do not have access to a car and therefore walk to the local Children Centre. As we are supposed to be advocating health & well being exercise promotes positivity and mindfulness. By



re-purposing Children Centres less will be on offer and also capacity will be limited.

■ Repurposing is closing it for what it used to offer. So they may as well openly state it is closing. People will use the open centres less as they will be unsure what is on offer so lots of social media profiling will need to be done. Doing out-reach sessions sounds great on paper but it is not worth the time and effort and promotion. Use the centres that will be open for a larger variety of groups.



## Vulnerable children

And it's just as bad for vulnerable children, with 83% warning that vulnerable families worse off because of the changes, with only one respondent believing there will be no change. Other respondents said time will tell.

Most staff feel that the redesign will have a huge impact on the vulnerable children they support. They are concerned that the most vulnerable will be the hardest hit as they may face barriers to attendance such as not being able to access the services where and when they need them, and transport issues.

And they warn that these vulnerable children will have fewer groups to access with their families and less contact with professionals, which could lead to opportunities for early intervention being missed. The changes will make it harder to engage with families, as drop-ins will reduce, and some families will become more isolated, staff warn.

### **What impact do you think the redesign will have on the vulnerable children in your area?**

■ It will not help them. They will need to travel further to a centre that can help them. They may not have a car and will need to walk some distance which, if they have several children, they may be unable to do, which will increase their vulnerability even more.

■ I consider the most vulnerable will be the hardest hit. Localised access together with outreach is key for those who are not as mobile as others.

■ I think the redesign will have a massive impact on vulner-



able children in my area and all over. Lots of things will go unheard and unnoticed, as bringing families into the centre things can be picked up quicker and easier. We need to be offering these vulnerable families something to encourage them to come into the centres.

■ Rural centres are used frequently for Signs of Safety meetings and contact. A close by venue means children can see parents in a safe place that is convenient and affordable (no transport costs). It has taken a long time for CCs to be viewed as part of the community and to lose this now could be a lifeline lost

■ It's an important and welcoming space in a rural location

■ I think that it will impact our families and children as they are aware of when the CCs are open to seek support when they need it, some more than others, by closing or partially closing some it will make it harder for those vulnerable families to access centres. Also families come into individual centres because they recognise staff and have built a safe rapport with them. The thought of going or speaking to someone new will act as a barrier for some. Distance will also impact families that are already vulnerable, for example closing Rob-ins in Needham market, the closest children's centre will be Ipswich or Stowmarket, for those with little income this will act as a barrier to them seeking advice and support.

■ I worry that they may become hidden, unseen and not given a voice

■ The vulnerable children will have fewer groups to access with their families, less contact with professionals and fewer opportunities. This could very well lead to opportunities for early intervention to be missed.

■ It will likely cause further risk or cultural, material and financial deprivation, higher levels of domestic abuse and neglect along with poor mental health and low stimulation.



## Volunteers

Paid children's centre staff recognise the contribution community and voluntary organisations make to the service. But just 9% of our respondents support their use without serious caveats, warning against increasing reliance on volunteers.

They suggest that third-sector providers should only be involved in 'value-added' services, rather than replacing existing funded services.

There are concerns about the reliability of volunteers delivering services, as the families need to feel they have stability. Staff are concerned about what would happen to these services if any external funding was lost, which is incredibly pertinent in the current economic climate.

Respondents are also concerned about the quality assurance of services, and how provision and attendance could be recorded and shared with children's centre staff. Other concerns raised cover areas such as ensuring safeguarding protocols are followed, and maintaining privacy and confidentiality.

### **What do you think about the idea of using community and voluntary organisations to deliver services?**

■ Community work is always valuable. We have used volunteers within our service and at times have been left to cover service or groups as no-one turned up. We haven't been able to fully rely on volunteers to deliver the quality of service that is expected of us

■ Children's centre staff know their families and know first-



hand what they want and need and they have the skills, training and expertise to deliver these services. Opening up to community and/or voluntary organisations will make safeguarding children more difficult.

■ I feel this is the thin end of the wedge - basically the council is sending a signal to me and my colleagues that despite years of training, holding degrees and other qualifications - anyone can do our work. I do not believe for one second financial support would not be provided under the current guise of “needs must”.

■ These services are very well meaning but they are funded often on a temporary basis and then they disappear as soon as the funding does

■ I feel that when dealing with our young people we need to have the most experienced professionals to deliver services

■ Crap. Simply trying to save money. Services will be inconsistent and things will be missed

■ Terrible and dangerous idea! Professionals should be there to safeguard, support and facilitate!



## Statutory duty

Councils have a statutory duty to provide universal services for under-fives. But around 70% of respondents think the redesign would negatively impact the council's ability to meet that duty.

Staff are concerned that the services provided will be more targeted than universal, and that non-targeted families will miss out.

And staff raise concerns that since the service was remodelled there has already been a shift in focus from emotional and social needs to health needs. While staff see the value in the health services they are concerned that their other services will fall away.

In terms of the outreach service, there are concerns that this will be difficult to resource with current staffing levels meaning there will be less time to spend with families, and services will be less effective at identifying those families in most need.

### **Tell us how you feel the proposals will impact on the Council's statutory duty to provide Children's Centre services for children under 5.**

■ The main mistake is making us unapproachable. We are no longer going to be open 9-5 and people can just turn up for help appointments only. This does not work if escaping domestic abuse. Children will be missing the sessions that have been removed as not targeted, but those sessions were the most busy sessions and had highest input of family support.

■ We will be so stretched and spend so long travelling between venues that less time will be spent with families. A lot of time is



spent recording interventions which need to be completed at a base, not in outreach venues. We also need peer support - this is not a job that can be done spending long periods alone. During our time working from home in covid we have had daily meetings and peer support meetings twice (or more) a week. This would not continue in normal times and I wonder with us stretched so far if we would lose that support.

■ They won't be providing it. It's not just buildings which will not be available but due to previous staff cuts there are not the staff to provide outreach services. Also there are cost implications to providing activities in another setting. We need to think more than ever about the cleanliness of the environment. This can be carefully managed well in a CC but not in another venue.

■ I think it will make it increasingly difficult for staff on the ground to continue to be able to guarantee we are meeting our statutory duty to children under 5. I already feel that the shift in focus, from emotional and social needs to more health needs, that has occurred as a result of the re-modelling, has already impacted the way we work with and support families, and I believe this will become even more pronounced with the closure of children's centres.

■ If the council felt that they would really like to continue to make a difference to children and their families then they should continue with even the 6 or so centres providing a dynamic variable service to the community. Not change it every 2 to 3 years ... It is the Opportunities we expose the children and parents to from birth to 5 that will make the difference. Take it away and the problem 7 -11 year old is even more difficult to support with their family. This snowballs into an abyss ... If the council continues to support the children and their families through few but varied groups, in a generation or two the benefit will be paid back by the community.



## Different models – Full-Time Family Hubs

Staff are broadly supportive of the idea of full-time family hubs, though some have reservations and questioned changing the name from the recognised brand of children's centres.. There are concerns that the health side of services may dominate, and that external services may take precedence over children's centre ones.

Staff also raised concerns about the size and number of hubs being insufficient, particularly while social distancing measures remain in place, and the uncertainty over their future job roles.

### **What (if any) concerns do you have about the different aspects of the proposed redesign?**

- They will become very busy as other centres are part time. Office space will be cramped with extra staff needing desks. More stress on everyone and the building.
- They are ok but sometimes it is important to see families face to face especially vulnerable families
- Tends to feel as though we are going back to family centres and this can stigmatise those who access them.
- How will this work with social distancing requirements which the government have said are likely to be in place for some time if services are condensed. The bigger children's centres were already working close to capacity.
- These seem like a good idea. Links between health and CCs are stronger and in partnership can offer a full rounded service
- What will this look like for staff and families? What impact will it have on my job role?



## Different models – Part-Time Family Hubs

Staff were far less supportive of the part-time model, feeling that these will provide fragmented support to families, and that rural communities need more support, especially because of the likely rise in poverty due to Covid-19.

There are concerns over staffing levels, and whether the expectations of Suffolk County Council around having staff covering the centre and being out in outreach centres are realistic. There are concerns around the maintenance and security of the buildings if they are being used by external agencies, and also around these services taking precedence over children's centre services.

### **What (if any) concerns do you have about the different aspects of the proposed redesign?**

- Better than nothing but rural communities need more
- Concerns over who monitors and cares for the buildings if they are then used by outside agencies. I feel this could be confusing for professionals and families.
- It could put people off trying to access our services
- Part time may not be enough - current rises in poverty and abuse should tell us this.
- This seems fairly pointless. If we have the building, why not use it? Will families take the time to work out when they can / can't use the centre or will they just go somewhere else? I suspect when numbers of users drop this will be the justification for closing these centres too.



- They will be needed full time and more hours. Weekends & evenings to cater for families who cannot make 9-5pm
- Not sure how this saves money but just reduces services
- How can someone escape DV if they can only go on set days and times?!

## Different models – Repurposing for nursery/school places

Staff appreciate that more nursery places are needed, but they feel that this should not be at the expense of children's centre service provision.

### **What (if any) concerns do you have about the different aspects of the proposed redesign?**

- Most of the places being repurposed are small and would offer only a handful of extra spaces at most. These are not really being repurposed but sold to private companies and effectively closed to SCC users.
- If an area is expanding due to new builds then I think the builders should pay a levy to extend schools/Doctors etc and all local amenities. Leave the CC alone.
- I understand there is a shortage of nurseries however it will take more away from the community in some areas.
- Nursery places are needed but not at the expense of other service provision
- I agree that there is a need for additional nursery spaces, as previously have worked in this field, but have all avenues



been explored before closing these centres? From research via schools admissions, some of the centres that are repurposed for additional school places, the primary schools PAN number is not exceeded.

■ Only if nurseries actually have waiting lists will this help. I don't know if many do?

■ Will there be enough affordable

■ Early development is just as paramount if not more paramount to a child's development. Taking this from 0-5 will impact their achievements in school.

## Different models – Closures

Staff were far more clear about closures, with 85% of all respondents taking the chance to express their concerns. Members are concerned that this will result in whole communities not having access to a centre, and families who are already disadvantaged will become even more so.

### **What (if any) concerns do you have about the different aspects of the proposed redesign?**

■ Need of the area and accessibility. No pop in for domestic abuse support

■ Parents will have nowhere to take children.

■ Whole communities will not have access to a centre, families already disadvantaged will have to travel a long way at great expense.

■ Make the centres fit for the purpose. No closures needed. More CCs needed.



- Such a waste, Reydon CC was closed, it is missed by many people. I still don't understand the rationale used to support closure.
- Impact of areas that are more remote leaving families with nowhere to go with their children
- Where will families who access that centre go for support, such as groups. See above re transport issues
- Ensuring enough access for all areas including rural.
- People will be left without support, socialisation and help

## Different models – Outreach provision

Staff have numerous concerns about the plans for outreach provision. In terms of the possible locations to be used they are worried about the health and safety of the venues for staff and service-users and whether or not they are appropriate for use. They raise concerns about whether there will be storage facilities or if staff will be expected to transport equipment.

There are concerns around the accessibility of the venues, in terms of public transport and car parking, and there is concern that rural locations may be difficult to access without transport. There are also concerns around the costs that will be incurred, through venue hire, as well as staff time and travel.

### **What (if any) concerns do you have about the different aspects of the proposed redesign?**

- Linked with community projects, not CC staff in the community. This hasn't worked before and takes staff away from



other aspects of their role.

■ Tried before - very expensive, locations do not allow storage so how do you transport all equipment needed? Should not expect staff to ruin their cars so will need to provide a van (more money) also trying to find somewhere suitable is a nightmare.

■ This has to continue along with good base property. Outreach does what it says on the tin.

■ Outreach groups in my area struggle with attendance. Our families prefer to come to the centre where we have parking close by, we are entirely baby/child proof and we have all the facilities they need. Outreach can be difficult for staff who have to move significant amounts of equipment for some groups. Where will this equipment be stored? More people will be using the remaining centres so there will be less storage space there. There are few locations available that have the necessary facilities and safety equipment.

■ In a rural location these are hard to find and hard for families to get to.

■ Outreach provision can be costly, lacking privacy, not suitable/clean enough. Not sure there is the staff to provide enough outreach. Very time consuming on staff time.

■ This will impact on workers, if more time is being spent travelling and setting up etc, less time can be spent with families. Also, the cost of hiring other services and paying travel expenses/workers' time, needs to be offset with the savings made from closing centres.

■ Costs incurred will be high. Availability for hire of halls may be limited. Cleanliness may not be up to the standard of a children's centre. No storage space for equipment. Staff having to carry equipment to venues - loss of work hours travelling back & forth.

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