

Campaigning against cuts can win

Manchester Sure Start saved Campaign continues fight to save childcare

All 39 Sure Start centres in Manchester have been saved following a mammoth year-long battle by parents and staff against the council. The centres have been guaranteed funding and current levels of staffing for the next two years. A Save Manchester Sure Start campaigner, who is also a member of the Socialist Party, spoke to Hugh Caffrey.

What does the council's announcement mean?

It means that Sure Start is staying open and will continue to deliver the services it's delivering at the moment. It's going to be universal, so available to all families no matter what your income is. Since it was established Sure Start hasn't really met the needs of the hardest to reach groups so I'm really pleased that by having a more targeted approach and a more assertive outreach, it's going to reach more of those groups.

At the beginning the plan was closure, then it moved onto outsourcing - this is like Plan Z for the council! The most significant thing is that it's remaining under council control and will be run by council staff who are better trained and on better terms and conditions compared to the private sector, and who are dedicated to the service.

How has the campaign made the council get to this point?

From day one, the council leadership thought the idea of 'consulta-

tion' was to say: 'There is no alternative, we're skint!' So the first thing was to get real consultation. And while the consultation has been going on, they've had to keep Sure Start running 'business as usual', so it's a full year that Sure Start has had to continue.

Every few weeks they've had to have meetings with us, because they've been badgered into it. I think at the start they thought we'd just go away, but we're a credible campaign and we know what we're doing including with the legalities, we know what we're on about!

What's going on with childcare?

The proposal is that the council will no longer be a direct provider of childcare, and that's a major blow because council childcare is cheaper than private childcare, and it's better-run.

Manchester council is proposing that parents who are going to struggle to stay in work because of the cost of private childcare can apply to a fund for support with childcare costs. Also this fund will be available for childcare for children with additional needs.

What's wrong with this proposal?

What's the criteria? What's classed as 'affordable' childcare? Also public funds are going to be used to put pennies in the pockets of the already over-paid private sector childcare bosses. You'll have the 11% who are currently using council childcare, you'll have those in school nurseries where the council's proposals mean the hours provided are cut from 25 to 15 hours, and you'll have the funding for free childcare from

the government - but the worry is that there's not going to be enough places for any of this!

What is the campaign doing about this?

We're going to the scrutiny committee, we've got a speaker there who's going to talk about the impact this is going to have, and the fact that two-thirds of Manchester residents are opposed to the council withdrawing from childcare. Then we're lobbying the council executive.

Then there's the trade unions, because this is also about people's jobs. We need to get some leadership from Unison at Manchester council, to implement their own policies on childcare. There's 500 staff working in council childcare, so that's going to be 500 jobs that are no longer in this city.

What are some of the lessons for similar campaigns elsewhere?

I think at the end of the day it's: don't give up! Make sure the council knows there's a big army behind you, and stick to what you set out to achieve, with clear reasoning. Keep hammering away at keeping it universal and keeping it public. Engage with other activists, with trades councils, with people who've done it before and with people who've got ideas about how to campaign.

Save Manchester Sure Start campaign actions:

Lobby executive committee meeting: Wednesday 15 February, 10am
More information: email savesurestart@hotmail.co.uk or go to "Save Manchester Sure Starts" on Facebook.



photos Save Manchester Sure Start campaign

Salford campaign saves day care centres

After several weeks of protest, two adult day care centres in Salford have been reprieved from closure by the council for 12 months. Humphrey Booth in Ordsall and Craig Hall in Irlam provide day care services to elderly people and adults with learning difficulties. Both faced closure through funding cuts by the Labour-run local authority. Steve North, branch secretary of Salford Unison and Socialist Party member explains.

Before Christmas, Salford council announced proposals to close at least two day care centres in Salford. It would have meant the loss of at least 40 jobs and the removal of the service for at least 200 service users.

The Unison branch took the position that we were opposed to this, not only because it was our members' jobs but also because we felt it was a brutal and unnecessary cut that needed to be opposed. We were contacted by members of the community who were equally outraged at the proposals.

We convened two community meetings, and one large meeting which attracted around 150 people. At that meeting we agreed a campaign strategy which included letters of protest to councillor Wharmisham, who is the lead member for Adult Services, and to local ward councillors. We also agreed a series of protests outside council meetings.

On Friday 3 February a number of protesters approached councillor Wharmisham at his surgery in the Langworthy ward, and demanded

he rethink the proposals because of the impact they would have on vulnerable people in Salford.

Reversed position

Later that day, as branch secretary of the Unison branch that has led this campaign, I received a statement from councillor Wharmisham that contained a statement from council leader John Merry which categorically states "we will not be proceeding with the changes in 2012/13."

Moreover, before "any further consideration is given to this matter", four points must be "concluded" including making sure need can still be met and considering the views expressed in the consultation.

The council has reversed its position because of the strength of the campaign. There are still no long-term guarantees for these centres. We will continue to fight to ensure the future of these services and the jobs of the people who work in them are secured. The message to any other campaign is: It's always worth fighting, and if we fight we can win!

Defend care services in Medway

Jacqui Berry
Secretary Medway Against the Cuts

Up to 100 disabled service users, staff, carers and anti-cuts campaigners marched through a bitterly cold Chatham on Saturday 4 February. We were marching against Medway council's plans to close down the Balfour Centre, which provides day care services to disabled adults. The council also plans to privatise its only three in-house care homes; Robert Bean Lodge, Nelson Court and Platters Farm.

The council claims that since the introduction of Direct Payments (money given to those in need of care to purchase it privately, rather than through the council, which cannot be used to access council run services) the numbers attending the

Balfour have fallen dramatically. This flies in the face of the experience of the staff, who are fully booked and providing up to 90 dinners a day. The council refuses to release the real figures as they say it would go against the Data Protection Act.

Cutting corners

Council officers also claim that the cost of providing care could be reduced by £200 a month per resident if Robert Bean, Nelson and Platters are given over to the private sector. What they either fail to recognise or wilfully disregard is that there is a reason the private sector would provide care so much cheaper, while still turning a profit for the shareholders. It is because the private sector cuts corners. The quality

of care, especially for the facilities providing specialist dementia care, would suffer dramatically.

The council has provided Balfour attendees with a list of alternative day services, many of which are up to 30 miles out of the area, or are provided by Age Concern. The Balfour Centre is a service for working-age adults!

During the 60-day (over Christmas) consultation process, hundreds of staff, service users, carers and anti-cuts campaigners turned out to meeting after meeting to voice their opposition to the proposals. On 4 February Medway Against Care Service Cuts was launched. Thousands of petitions have been signed and there is a mood of determination to force the council to back down.

Open the books

We need to exert real pressure on councillors, we need to embarrass them in the press, we need to demand that they open up the books on Balfour, Robert Bean, Nelson Court and Platters. If they really are such poor value for money, then prove it!

The elephant in the room is that this is nothing to do with the quality or the uptake of these services and everything to do with the council merrily carrying out the Con-Dems' pro-cuts, pro-privatisation agenda.

Medway Against Care Service Cuts is holding lobbies, petitioning, press stunts and the Broken Hearts Demo at the council cabinet meeting, taking place on Valentine's Day. Keep on reading the Socialist for updates.



On the march photo P Walker