

Statement Vicky Drew

Good evening. My name is Vicky Drew, I was the lead petitioner for the Children's Centre campaign and I'm North East Somerset Labour Party Secretary.

Protecting funding for intervention in the early years, the most crucial time of all – has been of great concern to myself and many other local campaigners. When a devastating £2.3 million cut to Children's Centres was announced by the Cabinet in Autumn 2013, we started a campaign to protect this service. Having been a councillor myself, I know the pressure that cuts from the Coalition Government in Westminster are placing on local services. Nonetheless, saving this service was our top priority.

After much hard work we convinced the Council that cutting Children's Centres was a false economy, and in January some of the reduction in funding was reversed. One million pounds of extra money for services that help families across the local authority was granted thanks to the determination of parents, staff and activists, working together for the public services we all value. I pay tribute to all those involved in the campaign. Without their determined action we would be talking about the Children's Centres we used to have. Instead we can seize the opportunity to develop exciting new forms of co-operative provision in Bath and North East Somerset.

But this is no time for complacency. A devastating sum of more than one and a half million pounds is still to be slashed from this budget. Nationally, the Coalition Government has shown scant regard for the contribution of Children's Centres to family life. Despite pledging to protect them, 628 Centres have closed since the General Election. Here in the South West, Cornwall has lost 22 of its 40. In Bristol six have closed. One round of cuts leads to another as it has in Swindon.

Each closure represents a blow for families in our region. The Council's own consultation revealed how worried people are about losing their Children's Centres and the universal services that go with them. People value the opportunity for them and their children to meet other families from their local area, and build networks of support and friendship.

Sticking-plaster solutions can't be a long term option. Radical change is needed to secure the services that families rely on or the programme of early intervention will fade away. This will increase costs in the long run as opportunities to solve problems for they occur are lost. Good early years services have effects long into the future.

A staff mutual in B&NES can be part of the answer. We should be proud that our Children's Centre staff are so committed that they want to run the service themselves. By allowing the staff to put together a business case under the Right to Provide guidelines, the Cabinet would show its commitment to families and equal opportunities for children no matter their background. I call on councillors to trust their professionals. Give them the time and resources to develop a new service provision and start a better future for children and young people in Bath and North East Somerset.