



Labour Friends
of **Sure Start**



**Sure Start,
What Future?**

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Contents

Tristram Hunt	
<i>Shadow Secretary of State for Education</i>	1
Michael Pavey	
<i>Director of Labour Friends of Sure Start</i>	3
Helen Berresford	
<i>Director of External Affairs, 4Children</i>	6
Graham Allen MP	
<i>Labour MP for Nottingham North and Founding Chair of the Early Intervention Foundation</i>	8
Ben Thomas	
<i>National Officer for Education and Children’s Services at UNISON</i>	10
Catherine West MP	
<i>Labour MP for Hornsey & Wood Green</i>	12
Sharon Hodgson MP	
<i>Shadow Minister for Education</i>	14
Charlotte Brady	
<i>Sure Start User and Campaigner</i>	16

Labour Friends of Sure Start pamphlet, ‘Sure Start, What Future?’, 2015

Forward

Tristram Hunt MP

Shadow Secretary of State for Education



It would have been far more rewarding to have been writing this foreword as part of an up and running Labour government, with a mandate to focus on the early years to promote aspiration and tackle poverty. And, though it would not have been easy, we would have fought hard to revive Sure Start children's centres. After all, Ed's leadership was, first and foremost, about reducing inequality. And to my mind there remains practically no other policy proposal as effective at spreading opportunity and narrowing the gap than Sure Start.

According to the Sutton Trust the poorest children can be up to 19 months behind their wealthier classmates when they start school at age five. Meanwhile, Save the Children research shows that 80 per cent of the GCSE attainment gap is already present by the age of seven. Not a week seems to go by without some new academic report from a neuroscientist or cognitive psychologist showing the profound link between good parenting and strong family relationships in the very early years of a child's life and life-long wellbeing. The evidence that early child development has important consequences for a whole host of future outcomes - from mental health, employment and material success, right through to the propensity to commit crime or abuse substances - is conclusive. That the Tories could be so laissez-faire about Sure Start's relative decline during the last Parliament was bad enough. That they now respond to this consensus with future funding cuts is blinkered in the extreme.

So rather than rebuilding Sure Start, we must now face up to the far more depressing task of saving it. If we must wait until 2020 for the next Labour government then we have to do everything to make sure that - however withered - this policy still has some roots that can then grow back. That must begin with the next Labour leader using the potency of education policy - its capacity to tell a story about a different society; its centrality to culture, creativity, wealth creation and work - to offer a more hopeful vision of the future. As Robert Putnam's magisterial new book on the American Dream *Our Kids* shows, early years inequality calls into question the value of equal opportunity that western societies believe themselves to be built upon. A compelling narrative of an alternative Labour Britain must have a sure start for the most disadvantaged children at its heart.

However, the truth is that keeping the Sure Start flame alive falls far more to grassroots activists, local councillors and campaign groups like Labour Friends of

Sure Start than it does the Shadow Cabinet. It is far better to use what power we have, than bemoan the fact we are out of it for five years. We need to work with civil society to help the people who will suffer most from Tory government - building on Labour history, from its origins and before, of self-help, co-operation and mutual assistance. And we need to make sure that every Labour council makes protecting Sure Start centres in disadvantaged areas a spending priority. Every council faces difficult decisions - and the vast majority will do their utmost to protect Sure Start. But given the Tory intransigence, to a large extent our hopes for the future lie with the Labour movement's ability to deliver.

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Introduction

Michael Pavey

Director of Labour Friends of Sure Start



The very existence of Sure Start is now in serious jeopardy. This pamphlet aims to launch a new, inclusive campaign to save our Children's Centres.

What a difference two years makes. In Summer 2013, Labour Friends of Sure Start (LFoSS) published *Sure Start, Sure Future*, a set of reflections on the future of Sure Start.

It was a tremendous success, shaping debate for months to come. In no small part, this was because *Sure Start, Sure Future* was an optimistic, uplifting read. Yes, the Coalition Government had slashed funding and closed hundreds of Centres - but that same Government was deeply unpopular and the General Election was approaching.

Consequently *Sure Start, Sure Future* was stuffed full of practical suggestions. Practical suggestions which were all predicated on a Labour Government in 2015. We all know what happened next.

The dust is now settling on a devastating election defeat and we face an invigorated Tory Government gleefully outlining further brutal cuts, including to the Early Years. Against this bleak backdrop, LFoSS is determined to keep the Sure Start flame burning.

Sure Start, What Future? comprises new reflections from those who contributed to the original pamphlet. It is a more sombre read, but it is not defeatist. And it shows a clear consensus on the way forward.

Sure Start Centres need to widen their remit, to become community hubs encompassing a range of family services. In the words of Sharon Hodgson MP, in this way “Sure Start Children's Centres can truly blossom and flourish and take their rightful place as the important and inspirational institutions that they are.”

There must also be a reinvigorated push to prove Sure Start's value through a robust evidence base, what Graham Allen MP calls “prioritising evidence-based services which help children to develop a strong social and emotional bedrock and in doing so, heading off future problems before they are able to take root.”

But the strongest message in this pamphlet isn't about policy; it is the need to campaign tirelessly to protect our Children's Centres.

After a seemingly endless General Election campaign it might sound perverse to say we need to campaign more. But campaigning is not the same as electioneering. It is right and proper that during the long campaign we remorselessly criticised the Tories for closing Centres. But we now need to move beyond the politics of protest.

We need to shift from adversarial electioneering to problem-solving and consensus-building. Rather than using Sure Start as a means to attack the Government, we need to work together to find the creative solutions necessary to keep our Children's Centres open. As Tristram Hunt says in *Sure Start, What Future?*, "It is far better to use what power we have, than bemoan the fact we are out of it for five years." We all have a vital role to play in this.

We need a clear and consistent lead from the Labour national frontbench. Praise for Sure Start is very welcome, but we need to go further and make clear that the retention of a comprehensive national network of Children's Centres is critical to the ability of the next Labour Government to deliver transformative Early Intervention for disadvantaged families.

Our frontbench cannot offer money, but it can provide clear leadership in asking Labour Councils to avoid closing Children's Centres. This will not be easy. After years of brutal budget settlements, there are no painless cuts left in local government. But we need to build a consensus across the Labour movement, that Sure Start is unique and that it literally faces extinction.

We then need councils to embrace this challenge. We need Labour councils to innovate and to share their experiences. Whether it is delivering Sure Start in partnership with the voluntary sector, integrating Public Health functions into Children's Centres or stripping out additional management tiers, there is always an alternative to closure. Each Authority will need to find the solution which best suits its own community – but we need all Labour councils and all Labour Opposition Groups to insist that Sure Start Centres remain open.

The Children's Centres themselves have a huge role to play. We need all Centres to provide clear evidence of their transformative impact. We need a flow of robust national headline data, but even more importantly we need every local campaign to be empowered with clear evidence that their local Children's Centre is transforming lives in that neighbourhood.

Evidence is critical, but even more crucial is harnessing the power of personal testimony. Over a million families used Children's Centres in 2013. Like Charlotte Brady in this pamphlet, every single Sure Start user has a story. We need to ensure that these stories are heard. Not by unleashing the anger of protest in a wall of noise, but by placing the personal stories of Sure Start users at the absolute heart of a new, inclusive campaign.


During an election campaign it's always good to enlist mums with buggies to picket a Town Hall or to pose with a PPC outside a Children's Centre. But we now need to move beyond this, to move beyond the politics of protest. Sure Start supports people in their darkest moments; understandably parents don't always find it easy to share their experiences. But it is the impact of these human stories which, more than anything else, illustrates the incredible impact of Sure Start. We need to build warm, inclusive campaigns which show Centre users the power of their words and empower them to share their stories with local and national decision-makers.


The very existence of Sure Start is now under threat. We simply cannot afford to lose it. It took Labour almost a decade to build a nationwide network of Children's Centres. And that was in the years of economic plenty. If we lose this priceless infrastructure now, it will be gone for generations. The human cost of this would be simply incalculable. We can prevent this by working together.

Personal testimony is a uniquely powerful tool. When combined with a clear evidence base, a council keen to help and a national frontbench giving full support – that personal testimony becomes an unstoppable force. That is LFoSS's goal and that is what Sure Start, What Future? seeks to start building.

I'd like to warmly thank all the contributors and the LFoSS team for producing this pamphlet. We will be working hard to flesh out these ideas over the coming months and we very much welcome all contributions to the debate.

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Helen Berresford

Director of External Affairs, 4Children



Labour Friends of Sure Start

As a period of intensive debate about Labour's past and future takes place, Sure Start is likely to be championed by many as one of the party's greatest recent achievements. It is often referred to in Labour circles with the same reverence as the NHS - and rightly so. Sure Start centres have become an invaluable resource quickly in comparison, embedding themselves in the hearts of communities, treasured by the parents and children who use them.

The current context

But it is no secret that times are tough. With Local Authority budgets significantly reduced and further cuts likely to be on the way, those local authorities and Children's Centres who have stretched every sinew to maintain services are likely to be tested even further.

As a result it can be difficult to look ahead, but to secure the future of Sure Start and the best start for children, it's a must.

The future – Children and Family Hubs

We at 4Children have proposed transforming the existing network of Sure Start centres into Children and Family Hubs – a potential game changer for public services and how families interact with them in modern Britain.

Hubs would join together and coordinate services around children and families, supporting children as they grow up – from those vital early years to helping negotiate the difficult transitions in their older years.

With an Early Intervention approach at their core, they would work from the universal end - breastfeeding advice and childcare right through to mental health support and child protection. Offering both universal and targeted support is essential to removing stigma and getting families through the door but is also vital because families move in and out of difficult situations needing more or less support at different times.

This approach would mean breaking down silos – still too often a feature of service-delivery - by working across professions and sectors and supporting the whole family. And importantly at this time, co-locating and coordinating services in such a way would also make the best use of investment from the public purse.

And in many areas the building blocks of this model are already there, with increased partnership working with health, social care and local troubled families programmes.

Seizing their potential

No other part of our national infrastructure offers the same opportunity presented by the network already in place through Sure Start Children's Centres - from the strength and reputation of the brand and the trust staff have built up in their communities, to the physical spaces and buildings in which their activities and services are delivered.

Joining services up, bringing communities together and making public services work better for families should underpin Labour's approach to family policy. What better way to start than committing to transform the success story of the last Labour government into the success story of the future?

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Graham Allen MP

Labour MP for Nottingham North and Founding Chair of the Early Intervention Foundation



Every politician should know what every parent knows: that there is no more important issue than Early Intervention. What we do early on sets the future. For our own economy Early Intervention will enable billions to be saved on the costs of failure and dysfunction – far more than any austerity package. In our Government, devolving power to our localities will enable every area to use the tools of Early Intervention to make better kids and families, and massively reduce social problems. One of the Key Early Intervention tools is Sure Start.

In 2013 the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) was launched, championing and supporting the greater use of Early Intervention measures to tackle the root causes of social problems amongst children and young people. Two years on the Foundation is now a highly regarded ‘What Works Centre’ and is the national, cross-party authority on Early Intervention.

The EIF and Sure Start Centres complement each other and share a common goal – to help children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those hard to reach families who are most in need of the services on offer.

Many of the persistent and inter-generational social problems continue to grow because some of our children are not given the right type of support in their earliest years, when they experience critical periods of development. There is a well evidenced correlation between adverse childhood experiences and later development, so missed opportunities to target and tackle a problem early on can have long-term consequences.

The Government has estimated that the 120,000 most troubled families in England access public services at a cost of £9 billion a year – ranging from social workers, health visitors, drug and alcohol teams, mental health workers, job centre staff, housing officers and others. Early Intervention is about giving children the best possible start in life, but it is also about making savings for the public purse too.

Looking ahead to the future of Sure Start, Children’s Centres should take a leading role in the Early Intervention agenda, prioritising evidence-based services which help children to develop a strong social and emotional bedrock and in doing so, heading off future problems before they are able to take root.

Sure Start Centres are much loved, but evidence on their effectiveness has been mixed. A key consideration for providers must be to consider how they develop and deliver services and interventions which have a strong evidence base and a rigorous evaluation system, to ensure the best possible outcomes and provide value for money.

Sure Start’s biggest strengths lie in its knowledge of the community it serves, and the trust they have developed with its local people. The expertise and relationships that staff have cultivated of local issues and families is invaluable for providing relevant support for families. This unique position allows Sure Start to forge cross sector partnerships, particularly in the areas of health and Early Years education, to deliver an integrated and truly family-friendly service. Behind the scenes this means support is woven seamlessly together, with professionals across disciplines continually sharing information and updating one another on new developments. For preventative programmes to work, they must be led by people who families feel they can trust in environments where they feel at ease.

If we fail to capitalise on the unique place that Sure Start occupies in our communities, we will miss out on a vital, perhaps one off, opportunity to reach families in a way that encourages and empowers them to become part of their own solution. Only by addressing families on their own terms and turf and continually striving to ensure evidencing the positive outcomes being achieved can we hope to secure the future of Sure Start, and with it, the long lasting impact it delivers for families up and down the country.

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Ben Thomas

National Officer for Education and Children's Services at UNISON



The scale of cuts in Sure Start Centres is truly frightening. In 2015 alone, the following councils have announced reviews of their children's centres provision, all resulting in cuts or closures to services:

- Wakefield Council have announced that 11 of their 23 centres are to close
- Swindon Council have announced seven centres are to close
- Peterborough Council have announced eight centres are to close
- Trafford Borough Council are looking to close four of their centres
- Bury Council are planning to de-register eight centres
- Walsall Council plan to close five centres
- Rotherham Council have announced that 13 centres are at risk
- Northamptonshire Council are looking to close five centres
- Doncaster Council are looking to close three centres
- Liverpool Council have reported that 10 of their centres are under threat of closure as they look to cut 58% of their children's centre budget
- Northumberland Council have reported that five centres are under threat of closure
- Staffordshire Council has announced the closure of many of its children's centre buildings, with 35 of its 57 centres are to transfer to schools and libraries, with a further 11 centres under threat of closure
- Suffolk Council have announced that nine centres are to close
- Haringey Council have announced a £1.4m cut in funding for children's centres. Total funding for children's centres having reduced by 50% since 2012
- Cheshire Council has announced that six centres are under threat of closure
- Sutton Council have announced that they are reviewing the future of their 14 centres
- North East Lincolnshire Council have announced that half its centres are to be de-designated

Whilst singularly, these reductions could be seen as unfortunate, the picture of cuts and closures across all types of authority demonstrates that a systematic reduction in the number centres and the range of services available to children and families.

For too long, the arguments in parliament about Children's Centre cuts have been characterised by a government in denial, political point scoring, the passing of

blame on to local authorities and pedantry over the number of closed centres. Little thought appears to have gone into the impact of cuts on the children and families affected.

UNISON believes that there needs to be a forensic review of the impact of cuts on centres and services. In particular the impact on delivery of a 'hub and spoke' model of centres and whether this model can really match the aspiration of high quality services for children and families at the heart of every community. The argument about the future of Sure Start should not just focus on the number of building closures and the number of children reached. Sure Start Centres have always been much more than just buildings. The most important part of the centre has always been the staff and children within them.

Staff are also saying that services that were once free are now being charged for; a policy that is affecting those most in need of support from children's centres and those least able to pay.

We fear that the cuts will mean much of the progress made through the early investment in Sure Start being lost as key staff are lost, along with their skills and experience. This will risk Sure Start being branded a failure.

UNISON believes that a renewed commitment to Sure Start should form a key part of the Labour opposition programme. We need to remind people of the original vision of Sure Start and why the ideas that inspired the vision still make sense.

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Catherine West MP

Labour MP for Hornsey & Wood Green



"A Labour Government set up Sure Start Children's Centres because we understood that public spending needs to be focussed on preventing social problems in the first place not managing the consequences. There can be no better investment in our society than protecting and enhancing the network of Sure Start centres".

I wrote those words two years ago as I set out why I consider Sure Start Children's Centres to be one of the last Labour Government's finest legacies. When I agreed to write this follow-up I'd hoped it would be in different circumstances. Instead, we have a majority Tory

Government and face another five years of brutal cuts. The axe is set to fall hard on local government once more and disproportionately hard in the most deprived areas. Our Children's Centres are hanging on for their very survival. Since 2010, over 700 have closed their doors and many of those remaining have been forced to rely more heavily on volunteers or cut back on the services they offer. In my own constituency of Hornsey & Wood Green, three children's centres closed initially as the council struggled with massive government cuts of over £117 million. With a further £70 million of cuts over the coming three years, local authorities are being placed in impossible situations. I fear that across the country the next generation of parents won't have access to the decent and affordable childcare and support that was a lifeline to me when I had my daughter 12 years ago.

It's desperately sad to see this great legacy hollowed out. It's also foolish because they are a good investment for the taxpayer. Early intervention works. For every £148 spent on later childhood (12-17 years) and every £135 spent on middle childhood (6-11 years), the same impact can be achieved by spending £100 on early childhood (0-5 years). It is in these early years when children's lives can be dramatically improved.

So what can we do to defend our children's centres against this government's attack?

First we have to keep them at the top of our agenda and use every opportunity to argue the positive benefits of early intervention and joined-up services - with children's centres as community hubs at the heart of dedicated support to families. For some families that might be antenatal support, advice on breast feeding and stay and play. For vulnerable families, it could be more targeted one-on-one services to meet specific needs, support for post-natal depression, and

outreach. There is much talk about the need for joined up health and social care in later life - children's centres are a real example of this agenda already in practice. As a party we need to be vocal passionate advocates for the value of children's centres to families' lives.

Second we need to be innovative in a time of scarce resources. When I was Leader of Islington Council, we took out a layer of management and got our centres to work together in clusters to organise their outreach. It was tough, because some good staff lost their jobs, but at the time it meant we could keep our centres open and services running. Five years of brutal cuts on, savings will be even harder to find and councils will have to be ever more imaginative to avoid closure. We need to work together, share knowledge and ideas countrywide across our network of children's centres.

Third we need to keep making the economic case. Investing in early years has a huge impact on children's life chances and reduces the money that needs to be spent later on health, social services or education. At a time when resources are scarce, prioritising early intervention makes sound economic sense. It's also economically foolish for childcare to be so expensive, particularly in London, where huge numbers of, mostly women, can't return to work and pay taxes. Children's centres have the capacity to provide decent, affordable childcare - and the ones that do tend to be heavily oversubscribed. In the election campaign, David Cameron rushed out an unfunded promise of 30 hours childcare for 3 and 4 year olds with no thought on how it could be delivered. How about restoring the duty for children's centres to provide childcare and providing the much-needed funding to accompany it?

The situation is critical. If we continue to see closures or reduction of services on the scale of the last five years then this proud Labour legacy will be lost for the next generation. We need to use the opportunity of a new Labour Leader and hopefully a new Labour London Mayor next year to push Sure Start right back up the political agenda.

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Sharon Hodgson MP

Shadow Minister for Education



Sure Start was, and remains, one of the proudest achievements of any Labour Government. It was a new and revolutionary tier of public service totally focussed on the first years of life, in order to equalise life chances for all.

Encompassing universalism at its best with the most sophisticated and targeted early intervention techniques proven to transform lives. This may sound too good to be true, all motherhood and apple pie – but it was happening up and down the country every single day, under our very noses. It was working and lives were being transformed.

But it was still in its own infancy as a public service, still bedding in and before it had a chance to become as integral to British life as the NHS or universal schooling, it was ideologically attacked.

Sure Start has been under pressure since 2010, and the fact that over 700 centres have closed around the country since the Conservatives took office underlines just how serious the threats to these budding lifelines are. However, simply trying to turn the clock back will not do these centres, and the families they serve, any practical good, so it is time to look past our deep regrets about the situation and think more creatively and innovatively to help secure Sure Start's future.

As soon as the dust settled on the 2015 election results and the new Cabinet took shape it became clear that childcare was a key pillar of this new Government's plans. As welcome as this attention is, it falls to us to make sure that the core values of what we believe are crucially important in early year's childcare, are being properly expressed and understood. This means stressing how important it is to have quality childcare, with staff fully qualified to best serve children and families, and to also retain a focus on the most vulnerable children in the most deprived areas, giving them the chances in life that their better off peers take for granted.

Sure Start should be a crucial tool to help us do that, and we need to make sure the Government knows that, and can see the value of the contribution they make to their local communities. If we can do this we can stop further cuts to services, and make sure that the remaining centres will develop and grow in the future, and not live in fear of further reductions of services or total closures.

We all know the problems of ever increasing childcare costs over the last few years, with parents in my own constituency having to deal with childcare cost rises of 47% since 2010. Sure Start centres can, and should, be at the heart of

getting to grips with this issue. Childcare was one of the integral services always intended to be offered until Sarah Teather dropped the duty in one of the first diktats of the Coalition Government. Now is the time to reinstate that duty - particularly with the expansion of the free childcare entitlements for working parents recently announced by the Government. This means showing exactly what Sure Start centres are capable of doing, and what they were always capable of delivering.

By becoming children's hubs/community hubs as proposed by Frank Field and Graham Allen in their respective seminal reports, and more recently by 4Children, Sure Start Children's Centres can truly blossom and flourish and take their rightful place as the important and inspirational institutions that they are. These Centres have the potential to not only help solve our childcare crisis, but also transform lives and save billions of pounds through early intervention all at the same time. This was the vision of the architects of Sure Start, of Tessa Jowell, of Yvette Cooper, of Naomi Eisenstadt, of all the Sure Start staff over the years.

However, none of this can be done overnight, and none of it can be done without serious political will. I believe not doing this doesn't just waste a vital and much loved resource; it also wastes a serious opportunity to make life much easier for parents up and down the country. Parents need our support, children deserve the best start in life and the childcare system could well do with simplification and rebalancing. Sure Start must be at the heart of this, and despite the many challenges and trials we continue to face today, I am positive about the future. There is no doubt in my mind that progress is still possible if we all work in the best interest of families, building on what already exists.

I hope the Government will listen to this before it is too late and realise just what a brilliant resource they have at their disposal, and it will be our job to make sure, over the next five years, that we retain those centres we have left for future generations to build upon, so that the original vision becomes a reality.

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Charlotte Brady

Sure Start User and Campaigner



I first came across Sure Start in 2007, when my eldest was born. My health visitor mentioned baby massage and invited me to my local centre. There were five of us in the class and it was an opportunity to get to know other new parents, and to bond over aching boobs, difficult stitches and endless night waking. But more than that, it was a regular opportunity to learn from the health visitor and to think about what kind of parents we wanted to be. As we massaged our babies, we talked about biology, physiology and psychology. We discussed behaviours, different

approaches to parenting and how to deal with the things we found tough. We're still friends, and we now have 14 children between us.

All three of my children went to our local Sure Start nursery. The staff are kind, loving and supportive. There is great staff stability – many of the staff there have looked after all three of my boys over the last 8 years. The staff are well-trained, especially in areas of specific need such as family breakdown, domestic violence or bereavement. Learning through play is a cornerstone of the offering and opportunities for learning and personal development are provided for both children and their carers. It is a child-centred, holistic service, where every penny spent goes to the provision of high quality, affordable child care.

In the last pamphlet, I was asked to provide a vision for the future of Sure Start, a vision of how we could develop the service, building on its achievements and continue its mission to reach out to families. I imagined Sure Start centres growing in their communities, tailoring even more to local needs and becoming not only a space providing support for children and families, but also a place where the community could meet and engage with each other.

The situation now, however, is very different. Despite the fact that 1.05 million families are using Sure Start children's centres (an increase of 50,000 from 2013 to 2014) budgets are being cut, protection for funding has been removed and there are now 700 fewer centres than there were in 2010.

Where I pictured a service that would continue to drive equality of opportunity, improve school readiness, support working parents and provided much needed guidance and reassurance to parents, I now see a service fighting for survival.

Of course, it isn't the service that will fight; it's us, its users and supporters. We see the true value of these centres, we understand the difference they have made to children's and families lives and how loved they are within their local communities.

We are the people who can reach out to local councillors and MPs, to work with trade unionists and to explain to the media what local residents already know - just how important Sure Start is in changing lives and to show people that the aspiration 'every child matters' is as vital now as it was when Sure Start was launched 1998.

It may be a long fight, but as I see my youngest at nursery, and as I hear from other parents how much Sure Start has helped them, I know it is worth it.

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