

Too early for speculation on future of children's centres, says council

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Council bosses have said it is still too early to speculate about the closure of children's centres in Norfolk - after a report revealed as many as 1,000 may have shut nationally in less than a decade.

Sure Start children's centres were introduced by the Labour government in 1998 to provide one-stop shops for young children and their parents.

But a report by The Sutton Trust, based on research from academics at Oxford University, suggested that more than 30pc of children's centres had shut since 2009 - more than 1,000 nationally.

They found that financial pressures on local councils was the principal reason for change.

Norfolk County Council needs to make nearly £100m of savings by 2022 and when this year's budget was agreed in February, the budget to commission children's centres was halved, from £10m to £5m.

The Conservative-controlled administration is keen to get more services sharing buildings, which could see children's centres and libraries under one roof.

But that saving was branded as "too high risk" by Labour councillors, while Liberal Democrats had pushed for detail on what would happen if the £5m was cut from the budget.

Unison said the centres have a vital role in prevention, which can save money in the longer term, so it did not make sense to cut funding.

A petition calling for children's centres to be protected, set up by Labour councillor Emma Corlett, was signed by more than 5,500 people.

The council has said that

renegotiating with the providers of children's centres would hope to make savings.

But further detail on what the impact will be on children's centres has yet to emerge.

However, in the wake of The Sutton Trust report, the council has stressed it is too soon to speculate over mean children's centres in the county would join the list of those which have closed nationally.

A county council spokesman said: "It is premature to speculate about the closure of children's centres in Norfolk.

"We are clear that we will continue to commission and provide a range of early help services, especially for the

most vulnerable families, even if the building where they are based changes and is shared with other services."



Council bosses say it is "premature" to speculate on the future of Norfolk's children's centres, after a national report said more than 1,000 may have closed nationally since 2009.

Picture: ANTONY KELLY