

Surrey sent on a U-turn on SEND by MPs?

21 May 2025



Surrey County Council has made an apparent U-turn on MPs' engagement with SEND cases. The leader of Surrey County Council has pleaded with MPs to not "talk down" children services but work constructively and the council denied it was closing down channels of communication.

Liberal Democrat and Conservative MPs wrote separate letters to Clare Curran, the councillor in charge of children's services, after she sent an email saying the department would respond to fewer constituent SEND cases raised by members.

MPs had expressed their shock and concern in respective letters over Cllr Curran's statement that the service "will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available".

But at a full council meeting on May 20, Cllr Curran said she is "not closing down any channels of communication". The cabinet member said: "I set aside any impression that I may have given that I don't want to hear from MPs or that any lines of communication are being cut back, closed or shut down which is absolutely not the case."

Cllr Curran said she just wanted to reiterate and remind MPs that in some cases where a final decision has been taken, the appropriate route for the family to follow without delay, is to use a formal appeals panel.

Cllr Eber Kington, from the Residents' Association and Independents group, raised the issue at the meeting. He argued it was important that councillors and MPs did not have "communication barriers put in place by children's services" if their input was "not deemed appropriate or convenient".

At the meeting, Woking's MP Will Forster, who is also a county councillor, asked if Cllr Curran thinks the policy fits with the council's "leave no one behind" approach. The Lib Dem MP said he had about 40 active SEND cases.

The leader of Surrey County Council, Tim Oliver, explained that Surrey has over 16,000 children with education, health and care plans (EHCPs), one of the highest in the country.

In a speech to full council, Cllr Oliver urged MPs to "not talk down" Surrey's SEND service and "wilfully mislead the public". He encouraged MPs to "use your position to speak up for Surrey in Parliament, not to talk down a service that needs urgent national reform and support this council and government to implement reforms that work for our children, their families, and for all councils across the country."

Surrey MPs unite against County on SEND silence

21 May 2025



Surrey MPs have slammed the council for apparently closing down discussions on constituent SEND cases. In a rare case of unity between parties, both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have written separate letters to Surrey County Council criticising its decision.

The letter comes after MPs were advised last week that Surrey County Council "will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available". But a council spokesperson said the most suitable route for parents wanting to challenge a decision is by a formal appeal.

Posting on X, formerly Twitter, Zöe Franklin, Lib Dem MP for Guildford said: "This latest correspondence is further proof of the council's contempt for children with SEND requirements across our county." Lincoln Jopp, the Conservative MP for Spelthorne, wrote on Facebook: "It is deeply troubling that Cllr Curran has written to all Surrey MPs seeking to restrict the level of engagement Surrey County Council will have with us on SEND matters. This decision risks families not getting the real help they need."

Surrey County Council has come under fire in recent years for having one of the highest SEND tribunal appeal rates in England. Around 198 SEND-related complaints have also been upheld against it by the Local Government Ombudsman since the start of 2022.

The county council's most recent Ofsted SEND area inspection found that children with SEND had "inconsistent experiences and outcomes". But the Surrey authority would say it is on an improvement programme and is significantly investing in supporting SEND children both inside school and out.

The Lib Dem MPs claim many parents come to them with their case "only after they have exhausted all routes or have been unable to receive a reply". Liberal Democrat MPs Al Pinkerton, Chris Coghlan, Helen Maguire, Monica Harding, Will Forster and Zöe Franklin have written to Surrey County Council's Cllr Clare Curran to express serious concerns over the council's new policy on Special Educational Needs (SEND) casework.

The Lib Dem letter read: "The decision to sever communication between our offices and the Council contradicts the principles [of improving outcomes and processes] and ultimately harms the very people we are all here to serve: the residents of Surrey."

The Lib Dem MPs claim the council did not contact the group in advance to discuss her concerns before making this decision which effectively closes a vital avenue through which desperate families have previously sought help. They urged Cllr Curran to change her mind and continue a constructive relationship.

Conservative MPs Dr Ben Spencer, Rebecca Paul, Lincoln Jopp, Greg Stafford, Jack Rankin, The Rt. Hon. Claire Coutinho and The Rt. Hon. Sir. Jeremy Hunt have also penned a letter to the cabinet member to voice their concerns. The Conservative politicians said that "limiting engagement with MPs who advocate for constituents in this way is likely to be concerning for the public".

Similar to their Liberal counterparts, the Tories explained consistent complaints raised by their residents were based on communication in sharing updates, following legal time frames and chasing up consultation responses. Claire Coutinho MP said she spent "around a third of my constituency surgeries helping parents dealing with SEND and EHCP cases."

The Tory MPs' letter noted that Dame Kate Dethridge, the DfE's regional director, saw MPs' inboxes as a "useful weathervane" on whether the council's system is working.

The MPs wrote: "Where these issues arise, and particularly there appears to be a pattern or repeated concerns being raised, we must be able to advocate and engage, both on individual cases and on policy and service delivery issues." But, the Tories added that if the decision stands, they would like further clarity on the scope of future engagement with MPs.

Cllr Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning said: "We know and appreciate the important role MPs play for their constituents, and value strong relationships with our MPs, both about council services and policies, and their advocacy on behalf of Surrey to the national government. We have clear channels of communication between all Surrey MPs and the council.

"The recent communication sent to all MPs was to remind them that the correct process for families who are dissatisfied with a final council decision is to challenge it by way of a formal appeal. This is the appropriate and most effective route for families, and information on how to do this is always included when families are notified in writing of the council's decision."

Surrey Uni leads microbe recycling of lithium batteries

21 May 2025



A microbial electrochemical technology capable of recovering 90-95% of lithium from spent lithium-ion batteries has been developed by scientists at the University of Surrey.

The breakthrough offers a more sustainable and cost-effective alternative to conventional recovery methods and could be expanded to reclaim other valuable battery metals, like cobalt.

Funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the BioElectrochemical Lithium rEcoVery (BELIEVE) project set out to tackle one of the biggest challenges in lithium-ion battery recycling - reducing the environmental and economic costs.

Professor Claudio Avignone Rossa, Professor of Systems Microbiology at the University of Surrey and principal investigator on the project, said:

“Lithium-ion batteries power so much of our modern technology, from phones to electric vehicles, but current recycling processes remain energy-intensive, costly and inefficient. Our goal was to develop a bioelectrochemical system (BES) that uses microbial electrochemical technology to extract high-purity lithium from used batteries – which is currently very difficult to do.”

Traditional methods recover small amounts of lithium, sometimes as little as 5%, while more advanced techniques achieve higher yields but rely on corrosive chemicals.

Professor Jhuma Sadhukhan, Professor of Engineering and Sustainability at the University of Surrey and co-lead on the project said:

“This project is timely due to stringent legislation for material security, particularly tech-metals like lithium. With this respect, extraction-precipitation, electrosynthesis and crystallisation have been tried to recover lithium from brines; however, the methods have posed specific challenges, including low recovery of lithium compounds.

“Biotechnology-based biorefining is needed to close the LIB loop and thereby improve product grades and recovery rates, process robustness, social justice, economic returns, health, safety, environment and legislation. In this research, we optimised a biological system to recover high purity lithium from industrial black mass, a used lithium-ion battery material after thermal and mechanical processing, separating aluminium and iron.”

Dr Siddharth Gadkari, Lecturer in Chemical Engineering at the University of Surrey and co-lead on the project, said:

“By harnessing specially selected microorganisms to transfer electrons and extract lithium, we have developed a cleaner, more sustainable approach that dramatically reduces reliance on harmful chemicals.

“Our next steps will focus on proposals to expand the technology to recover and separate all valuable metals from batteries, including high-value cobalt, nickel and manganese. While challenging, this is a crucial step toward establishing a truly circular battery economy.”

Developing a scalable process that efficiently recovers lithium, cobalt and other valuable metals will not only reduce waste but also lessen dependence on environmentally damaging mining practices.

It also closely aligns with EU Green Deal 2020 regulations, which aim for a 65% recycling efficiency for lithium-ion batteries and a 70% material recovery rate for lithium by 2030. Similar regulations are anticipated in the UK, underscoring the significance of the BELIEVE project’s contributions to sustainable technology and resource management.

The team now plans to put forward new proposes to explore how they can recover all metals from lithium-ion batteries.

Darts mathematics lesson for Epsom college students

21 May 2025



Nescot (North East Surrey College of Technology) College in Epsom, Surrey welcomed a trio of darts legends and MC, Paul Starr to the college Wednesday to inspire students and encourage them to develop their mental maths skills. Paul ‘The Asset’ Nicholson, Devon ‘The African Warrior’ Petersen and three-time darts World Champion Mighty Michael Van Gerwen visited the college for the ‘Nescot Loves Darts & Maths’ event promoting arithmetic and numeracy, launching a college darts league and sharing their stories of determination and success.

Nescot hosted a full day of darts events, aimed at students re-taking their maths GCSEs. Nicholson and Petersen played a 5-leg match, then the players and Paul Starr held a Q&A and participated in a darts related maths quiz with students. Smaller groups of students later met the players in workshops on self-belief and inclusion.

The players also formally opened the newly branded Nescot Department of Maths. Each classroom now has a darts board and is named after a darts legend. In addition, Nescot launched a darts club and league, the first college in the country to do so. The inaugural Kapsalis Cup was contested between Nescot and East Sussex College Group, with plans to roll out a wider college league. During the sessions, all three players plus the MC were awarded a Nescot Honorary Fellowship and the day concluded with a ‘meet and greet’ for students.

The event was masterminded by Julie Kapsalis, Principal and CEO at Nescot, and also a massive darts fan. Julie makes an annual pilgrimage to the Lakeside World Championships and loves watching the sport, live and on TV. Having previously worked in sports PR, she also has contacts in the world of darts and reached out to them with the seed of an idea.

Julie said “Exciting and engaging students retaking their maths GCSEs was the challenge that made this day take shape.

We regularly invite leaders from business, sport and the community to share their stories and when looking for a maths enthusiast, my mind turned to my own sporting passion – darts.

“The response from the darts community was incredible, after one phone call we were gifted boards, surrounds and darts, then the representatives of top players suggested an entire day of events at the college. We created a mini arena, and it was so exciting to see darts legends step up to the oche at Nescot. We’re so grateful to the players, their management and everyone involved for taking the time to promote maths and inspire our students. Highlighting role models from all kinds of backgrounds and making learning fun are key at Nescot. I can’t wait to see our students’ playing darts in the classrooms. Game on!”

Michael van Gerwen said “It’s great to see first-hand how Nescot are using darts to inspire their students. It’s a brilliant way to improve mental maths, as the two go hand in hand. I love the fact the college is going to have a dartboard in every maths class too. It will be a fantastic addition, and I’m sure the students will love it.”

Devon Petersen said “It was a pleasure to visit Nescot College, and it’s so good to see them following core values and using darts to enhance their arithmetic. I have seen darts and maths work together in the work that I do for Bullseye Maths with young children, and Nescot will definitely see the benefits of using darts to enhance their education.”

Paul Nicholson said “Seeing young people like the ones at Nescot College enjoying the sport of darts today is so good to see, and I have no doubt that including darts as part of the student’s maths learning journey will only be a good thing. Darts is a sport for all, and it can be educational as well as fun, as proved with what Nescot are doing. Schools and colleges can only benefit from adding darts to their learning program.”

Darts is a sociable, inclusive sport, which almost anyone can access. It can improve mental health by enhancing cognitive function, reducing stress and boosting confidence. It also improves motor skills, hand-eye coordination and problem solving. Importantly for the maths department, the mental maths involved in darts can improve maths skills generally, especially around multiplication and subtraction.

Maths skills and mental maths are important for many employers. Nescot welcomes students who would like to retake their maths GCSEs and improve their employment prospects before they step into the world of work.

As well as functional skills courses in maths and English, Nescot offers a wide range of college courses for school leavers and adults, including Animal Care, Business, Computing and IT, Construction, Performing Arts, Childcare, Health & Social Care and Beauty Therapy. The college has an open event on May 15th, from 4.30 – 7.30pm, where prospective students can learn more about the courses, campus and facilities. To find out more about studying at Nescot call 020 8394 3038, visit www.nescot.ac.uk or email adviceteam@nescot.ac.uk

Image: Julie Kapsalis and Andy Cowan from Nescot alongside Devon Petersen, Michael Van Gerwen and Paul Nicholson

Surrey school children road safety faces funding challenges

21 May 2025



Children at a special needs school could be left waiting years for a much needed crossing. Clifton Hill School, on Chaldon Road in Caterham, is a secondary school for 11-19 year olds with severe and complex learning difficulties and special needs.

Students at the school demanded action in May 2024 after telling councillors they felt scared going on the road outside their school because there is no safe crossing. Pupils are encouraged to use the cafe in the church opposite the school as part of their independent living skills, but they said people “driving like maniacs” or even honk at them if the students take too long crossing the road.

Surrey County Council said: “In the interim we are looking into rectifying shorter-term issues such as improving line painting and signage, and we will keep the school and parents updated on this as we progress. We’ll continue to do all we can to keep our roads safe.”

Short-term measures included lowering a school warning sign so drivers can see it at car-level, getting the greenery cut back so drivers can see the signs, and installing a dropped kerb for wheel-chair users.

“Another term is over and our children can’t cross the road safely,” said Rachael Forkan, mum and member of the Clifton Hill Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Ms Forkan said she and the head were “not thrilled” the signal crossing was part of

a 'long-term plan' for improving the school's road safety. Ms Forkan said: "It isn't a bit helpful because that could be anything from two years to seven, and my son will leave there in five years' time."

Officers reported there were no dropped kerbs between the school and the church which made it "problematic to navigate" for wheelchair users trying to cross smoothly. Where the County Council would deliver road safety awareness training to students, for students with complex and multiple disabilities, like at Clifton Hill, officers said this type of training would "not be appropriate".

"It's definitely a priority for now," said Councillor Jeremy Webster for Caterham Hill. "But the [County Council] is telling me there isn't any money and that we have to wait a couple of years, but by then problems will be worse."

The local councillor described Chaldon Road as "problematic" with existing highways issues such as increasing pressure from developments and an unstable embankment. Cllr Webster told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) he would continue to urge the Surrey County and Caterham Parish council for their financial support.

Conservative MP for East Surrey, Claire Coutinho, who visited the school in summer 2024, said she recently met with Cllr Jeremy Webster at the school for an update on the crossing issue. Ms Coutinho said she asked him to maintain pressure on his colleagues at Surrey County Council to find a "funding solution" to get so a crossing installed as soon as possible.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said: "At a site meeting completed in October 2024 we recommended a zebra or push button signalised crossing as the most appropriate road safety measure to be introduced. We appreciate that parents would like this to be implemented immediately, however this assessment forms part of a wider piece of work across the county which has seen us identify demands for road safety measures across another circa 50 sites, and we will have to prioritise which of these sites are then worked on with any available funding. At present, the council hasn't set its budget for this area of work and as such no funding has yet been allocated.

"Which sites take priority will depend upon a number of factors including the level of road safety risk based on site observations and collision history, the number of people that would benefit from improved facilities, cost and the level support from the local community for any proposals. Once funding has been identified it typically takes a year to design, complete the legal consultations and then implement a zebra or signalised pedestrian crossing."

Surrey: Free school buses withdrawn

21 May 2025



Free school buses are being axed after a cross-country route was judged safe by Surrey County Council. Parents say the letter outlining the new walkable route explicitly states that the "personal safety issues of children travelling alone" were not considered. About 81 children from Esher High School are said to be affected. Compounding the problem, the council has stated that further funding to increase capacity on regular bus services is not available.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands parents are appealing the decision and have been in touch with Surrey Police. This comes just weeks after parents in South Nutfield were told children could walk across open rail tracks and flood-prone cow fields as the county council looks to make further service cuts.

Children who live more than three miles from their nearest school are eligible for free buses. The new route across the heath reduces the distance to just under that mark, meaning the children no longer qualify for the service. The council says the move will save about £180,000 per year and create space on "stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible."

One of the affected parents, Plamena Naydenova, received a letter that included directions on how her children could get to school, with 30 separate steps to follow. Among the instructions were phrases like "take the alleyway," "follow the footpaths through Molesey Heath Nature Reserve," and "turn right through the squeeze stile." Later, children are told to "cross the River Mole Viaduct Sluice."

Mrs. Naydenova said: "How can you call an 83-minute walk through dark heaths and unlit river paths a safe route? It's just honestly outrageous, the whole thing. It isn't about one child, it's a principle. It will affect many families, not just my two children. I walked it with my sister as I was afraid to walk it on my own. It goes through narrow alleyways, fields, mud along the embankment of the River Mole, with no fencing."

She added: "The bit that annoys me the most is the word safe—or safe for an accompanied child. Parents must accompany them, but the council doesn't see that other parents have other children to drop off or work commitments. I would need to leave the house at 7 a.m. to get to Esher. How would I get the other children to school, never mind my work commitments? It's very, very shocking. We all know it's about the money and cost-cutting. But be honest and

transparent—say ‘we can’t afford to pay anymore,’ not that there’s a new safe route.”

Since the shock email, parents have banded together. They understand about 81 other students have been impacted. Very few are expected to take on the route and, if their appeal fails, will instead use the standard bus network—although these services, she said, are often full, leaving school children at stops.

Mrs. Naydenova said: “It will put a lot of pressure on the existing paid buses. We aren’t going to let them walk across the heath. We only have one car, so the only other option is cycling, but how safe is that?”

Travel assistance will run until the end of the school year, but from September 2025, children will need to find alternative routes unless there is a change.

Surrey County Council’s cabinet member for children, families, and lifelong learning, Councillor Clare Curran, said the route to Esher High School was established following “individual safe walking route assessments” applied in line with national guidelines. She explained: “It is important to note that the guidelines consider the relationship between pedestrians and traffic, and assessments are undertaken on the assumption that the child will be accompanied by an appropriate adult if necessary. The Department for Education’s own school transport guidance also supports this position. It is suggested that suitable footwear and a torch are used where needed.”

She added: “The council provides contracted coaches to those eligible for travel assistance to Esher High School. By limiting the services only to those eligible in line with statutory guidance, the council expects a cost saving of approximately £180k per year, as well as the benefit of utilizing the stretched coach resources to provide travel assistance to those eligible. The national picture is of increased demand on transport services and therefore council budgets. We spent £64.9m in 2023/24 on home-to-school travel costs for around 10.7k children and young people.

“We take our responsibilities regarding home-to-school transport very seriously; however, we must balance this with our duty to ensure we are only using public funds for those who meet statutory guidelines for free transport or who are most in need of assistance. Amidst a set of challenging financial circumstances, the council is not in a position to continue to pay for transport for families where they are no longer eligible for assistance due to a safe route being established.”

Related report:

[Surrey school kids’ country walk saving money](#)

Image: Surrey County Council’s recommended safe route to Esher High School (Palamena Naydenova)

Surrey schools not out for so long in summer?

21 May 2025



Surrey County Council is looking at possible changes to school holidays.

A consultation has been launched on whether the county council should switch to a two-week half term break in the autumn - and is asking for families to give their feedback before making a decision.

About one in ten state-funded schools have already made the switch, including some in Surrey.

It has led some families facing added challenges when term times at different schools are not aligned.

If the switch to a two-week autumn half term break goes ahead, the added five days would be clawed back from the summer break, although the council said it would look to minimise this reduction “where there are opportunities to recover days through the natural positioning of bank holidays during the Christmas and Easter breaks”.

The consultation letter sent to parents read: “We are seeking to understand the views of all stakeholders in determining our future approach to term dates and if there is any appetite for change.

“This will enable the council, schools and multi-academy trusts to work in partnership to set term dates with an aim for more consistency for schools, school staff, and families.

“We acknowledge that there may be strong views on either side of this question, but we feel it is right and responsible to seek those opinions at a time when we are seeing movement towards a longer October half term by some schools.

“The combined responses from education settings, families and partners will help inform our approach to term dates for the 2026/27 academic year onwards.

“If it is determined that there is significant appetite for change, the council will adopt a two-week autumn half term break from the 2026/2027 academic year at the earliest.”

The survey runs until the end of the year, and closes at 5pm on Tuesday December 31 2024.

The school year would still be 195 days, including the five inset training days for staff.

Epsom SEND case highlights a national problem

21 May 2025



A shocking case of systemic failure by Surrey County Council (SCC) has brought renewed attention to the challenges faced by families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). After nearly two years of delays and inadequate support, the Mayle family from **Epsom** has finally secured a suitable school placement for their 7-year-old son, Joshua. However, the damage caused by SCC's inaction is undeniable—and emblematic of a national crisis.

A National Struggle for SEND Support

Joshua's case, while devastating, is far from unique. Across England, families are grappling with a SEND system under unprecedented strain. The number of children with EHCPs has surged by 77% since 2015, a rise that local authorities nationwide are struggling to accommodate. Against this backdrop, funding for SEND services has not kept pace, creating a perfect storm of unmet needs, prolonged delays, and rising parental frustration.

The Local Government Association (LGA) reported earlier this year that councils are grappling with a national SEND funding gap of over £1.9 billion. Without urgent intervention, local authorities warn that they will be unable to meet their statutory duties under the Children and Families Act 2014.

Surrey's Struggles in Context

Surrey County Council has seen a sharp rise in demand, with the number of children requiring EHCPs rising from 10,000 in 2017 to around 15,000 today. In response, the council has committed £240 million to SEND provision, promising 6,000 new specialist school places and additional support within mainstream schools. Yet, progress has been slow, and communication failures continue to erode parental trust.

Helen Maguire, MP for Epsom and Ewell, who intervened in Joshua's case, said:

"It is a sad day when a family in such dire straits has to approach their MP on an issue that should have been addressed much earlier by the local County Council. No family should have to escalate matters this far, especially when their child's needs are at stake. The voice of parents **MUST** be listened to, and while I am relieved that Joshua has finally received the education and support he deserves, it is deeply troubling that it took this long for the Council to act."

"This case highlights systemic failures within Surrey County Council's SEND services. Urgent reform is needed to prevent other children from suffering in the same way."

Surrey's challenges are reflected across the country. In some areas, families report waiting months—sometimes years—for EHCPs to be approved, with many forced to take local authorities to tribunal to secure adequate support. Nationally, tribunals have increased by 80% since 2016, with parents overwhelmingly winning cases against councils, further highlighting systemic issues.

The Role of Central Government

Local authorities are not solely to blame. Reductions in central government funding have left councils stretched thin, with many struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff to meet rising demand. The LGA has called for an urgent review of SEND funding, warning that councils are increasingly using general education budgets to plug the gaps, putting additional strain on mainstream schools.

The Department for Education (DfE) recently announced a SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, promising £2.6 billion in capital funding to create new school places and improve existing facilities. However, critics argue that the funding is insufficient to address the scale of the problem.

Paul Whiteman, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, warned earlier this year:

"The government's SEND review is a missed opportunity to address the systemic underfunding of support for children with additional needs. Families and schools need real solutions, not sticking plasters."

The Human Cost of Delays

For families like the Mayles, the impact of these systemic failings is profound. Joshua, once a bright and independent child, has regressed significantly due to delays in accessing the support outlined in his EHCP. His father, Alex, said:

“Surrey County Council’s failure to meet its statutory obligations is shocking. All children are entitled to an education, and they are being failed by a broken system that is underfunded and under-resourced.”

The strain on families is echoed across the country, with parents often feeling forced to navigate a labyrinthine system to secure their children’s rights. A recent survey by the charity Contact found that 65% of families with disabled children believe the SEND system is “not fit for purpose,” and 48% say their child’s mental health has suffered due to delays in accessing support.

A Call for Urgent Reform

Joshua’s story underscores the urgent need for reform—not just in Surrey, but across England. While councils like SCC grapple with rising demand, the root cause lies in a system underfunded at every level. Families should not have to fight this hard for their children’s education and wellbeing.

As the government prepares to roll out its SEND improvement plan, experts warn that without significant investment and a more collaborative approach between councils, schools, and families, the crisis will only deepen. For Joshua and thousands like him, the question remains: how many more children will be failed before meaningful change is delivered?

Surrey school kids’ country walk saving money

21 May 2025



Children have been told they can walk 4.9km through fields and over an unguarded railway line by Surrey County Council bureaucrats who cancelled their free bus passes.

The decision has left their family feeling “let down” and “frustrated” after the vital service relied upon for years was cut because a 10 kilometre hike was found by county hall officials.

Joe Massey was sent the letter informing him of the council’s decision after a “review” found the route was considered a safe walking route for children travelling from South Nutfield to Carrington School in Redhill.

The free bus service historically served the area but the so-called discovery of the new route means notice has been served on those who depended on the county council’s travel assistance.

Normally, free bus access is only provided to those who live more than three miles from their chosen school.

South Nutfield is within that distance but the narrow lanes linking the village to the school are unsafe for young people to walk along.

Now the council has written to parents telling them that a new 4.95 kilometre route - across muddy fields and unprotected railway lines is a suitable alternative - but as a precaution children should wear suitable footwear as the farmer’s field is prone to flooding.

The instructions, seen by the LDRS, on how the children should get to school read: “Follow the public right of way until you reach Mid Street.

“In places it is narrow, and it can be muddy with surface water, occasionally liable to flooding so appropriate footwear would be advisable after inclement weather.

“There are two stiles to climb over; these are easily scaled.

“The train track is an open crossing with no gates, barriers, attendant or traffic lights. The sightlines in both directions are long, straight and clear. It is a rural line, Redhill to Tonbridge, on average there are two trains per hour and occasionally a freight train making it safe to cross.”

Adding: “The public right of way continues across a farmer’s field which it can be muddy with surface water, occasionally liable to flooding.”

The decision was taken by the Surrey Travel & Assessment team alongside the Safer Travel team who had reviewed a

number of routes across the county previously been deemed unsafe.

They team wrote: “We understand that this may be disappointing news, however we have undertaken a thorough investigation into your child’s current eligibility, applying the travel assistance policy robustly, and this is the resulting outcome. “

Joe Massey, said they have two boys who will be impacted, one in year 10 the other in year 7.

He said: “We qualify for the council’s assisted travel scheme because the nearest school to us is over three miles away but we’ve received a letter f saying that as of September next year they’re going to be cancelling both passes - because they’ve found an alternative route that’s less than three miles.

“A big chunk of it is cross country through cow fields and rail roads with no bridge. It’s just open tracks.

“It’s a public right of way. We did the walk, there’s a cow field, you’re wading through mud.

“The council says it’s fine because its only 2.96 miles but the app says 3.06.”

“Some of the roads are really uncomfortable to walk along and to expect anyone to do it, especially in winter, is just unsuitable.

“And the fields are not lit at all; it’s just plain dangerous.”

Mr Massey said: “I’m extremely frustrated by the situation. Obviously the money is a big thing but it’s the principle.

“It took us an hour to do it, there’s no way in hell you’d send your child on that route.

“To then expect your child to walk for an hour ,they’re going to be exhausted.

“My wellies were caked in mud - they said in the letter to wear suitable footwear.

“It’s traumatic enough at secondary school but to have to carry muddy wellies around all day....

“We just feel let down and the option they’ve given us is just unbelievable.

“If any normal human being would have looked at that route, I can’t believe they would have sent the letter.”

Clare Curran, SCC cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning said: “This route has been established between South Nutfield and Carrington School following individual Safe Walking Route assessments that were carried out by the council.

“Safety of route assessments are carried out in line with Road Safety GB Guidelines. It is important to note that this is an assessment of the road safety of a walked route by an accompanied child - national guidance advises that the child should be “accompanied as necessary”. It is the expectation that the child, and the accompanying adult, will wear appropriate clothing and footwear for the conditions underfoot.

“The current travel assistance provided by the council is an annual bus pass on a public bus service. This costs the Council £881 per year for each pupil. In line with statutory guidance, these pupils are no longer eligible to receive a free bus pass through the council. Amidst a set of challenging financial circumstances, the council is not in the position to continue to pay for transport for families where they are no longer eligible for assistance, due to a safe route being established.

“The council is not prescribing that children should walk to school via the safe route that has been established; the option is still available to use the bus service. Families will be able to purchase a bus pass directly from the operator to continue to use the bus. Families can appeal against the decision to withdraw travel assistance via the stage one safety of route appeal form, and a link to this was included in the initial correspondence with the family.”

Image Joe Massey - on the new school walk

No wonder Woking went bankrupt. Scandal of private school loans

21 May 2025



A private school was loaned millions of pounds at favourable rates by Woking Borough Council before it went bankrupt. Now questions are being asked as to whether an independent inquiry will be launched into the “extraordinary use of taxpayer’s money”.

Greenfield School in Old Woking has loans of £13,257,756 according to full accounts published in September on Companies House.

Interest is just one percentage point above the Public Works Loans Board rate. The cash was originally borrowed by Woking Borough Council for “capital projects” before being passed on to the school.

Since then the council’s finances have collapsed under the weight of its unprecedented multi-billion debt from all the money it can not afford to repay – and its investment decisions have come under close scrutiny.

The matter of its role as effectively a bank was raised during the October 17 full meeting of Woking Borough Council.

The local authority was asked directly if it would set-up an independent inquiry into the extraordinary use of taxpayers’ money into the 2019 loan to Greenfield preparatory school, reportedly topping £11m.

According to the school’s set of accounts, its fees, which brought in more than £5m last year, are very carefully controlled and exceptional value for money.

Greenfield, the accounts said, is highly competitive when compared to other independent educational establishments within the wider Woking area.

In January 2021, Greenfield opened Little School, a 50.4 week a year day-care for children aged from six months to four years. In April 2022 the school opened its new buildings and took on extra staff.

The council’s loan was challenged on the grounds that the money was not used for regeneration and education is not in the remit of a borough council.

Woking Borough Council was asked: “Will the council set-up an independent inquiry into the extraordinary use of taxpayers’ money into the loan to the single entity, Greenfield preparatory school?”

Councillor Ann-Marie Barker, who took over as leader of Woking Borough Council after the loans had been agreed.

She said: “In July 2023, the council asked Grant Thornton, its newly appointed external auditors, to undertake a ‘Value for Money’ review, looking into the governance arrangements that relate to the council’s historic investment strategy.

“This is an independent report which is reviewing how past decisions (such as those related to Greenfield School) were made and the financial impact of these decisions on the Council’s financial sustainability.

“Grant Thornton have indicated that the Value for Money report will likely be published in October 2024.

“The council will make the Value for Money review report, alongside our response to its recommendations, available on our website at the earliest opportunity.

“It is important to wait for the findings of the independent review before coming to any conclusions regarding individual decisions.”

The school is a registered charity in Old Woking and has the benefit of extensive playing fields. In addition it takes advantage of Woking’s Pool in the Park to offer swimming lessons.

The school hosts community events including annual maths and English challenges, anti-bullying training, and football tournaments.

Pupil numbers are growing at a rapid rate and income from charitable activities increased by £582,037 to £5.3m- of which £5.2m was through school fees.

Overall the school made a loss of £502,562 last year according to its accounts and it has loans totalling £13,316,871, of which £13,257,756 is listed as “other loans”.

Its annual set of accounts read: “The loans were obtained to purchase a new site for the school. The loans are secured on property owned by the school and are for a total period of up to 50 years.

“During the first three years, no repayments will be made but interest will accrue and then it will be repaid over the next 47 years.

“The interest rate applicable will be one per cent point above the 47 year Public Works Loan Board Annuity Rate.”

The Public Works Loan Board provides loans to local authorities for capital projects – usually in the form of regeneration projects such as Victoria Square or Sheerwater.

The UK Debt Management website reads: “Decisions over which capital projects to pursue and whether to borrow for these investments are the responsibility of the elected council of each local authority, who are accountable to their electorates.

“Local authorities are free to borrow so long as the finance director is satisfied that they are acting in line with statute and can afford to repay the loan.

“The PWLB is a non-discretionary lender: it does not ask the purpose of a loan, as this would duplicate the decision-making structures of the individual local authorities.”

The Grant Thornton report could be ready for release by the end of this month.

Greenfield School Woking (image Google)

Surrey sorry for SEND shortcomings

21 May 2025



The leader of Surrey County Council (SCC) has apologised to families who have been ‘failed’ over the provision of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services.

Parents have previously told the local democracy reporting service (LDRS) that they feel SCC is “blocking the process at every single stage” to get EHCPs and SEND provision. Families say that communication has often been confusing and panic-inducing, including adding new dates for parents to select school places.

Council Leader Tim Oliver said he does not, and will not, “defend the indefensible”, before quickly adding an independent review found good, but inconsistent progress in Surrey’s SEND provision. He also added that the Department of Education (DoE) and Ofsted endorsed the council’s improvement plan.

The Council leader said the local authority should recognise that “other partners need to step up” to deliver an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Cllr Oliver said he “recognises that not all parents agree with the assessments”, but the council cannot get away from the fact that qualified professionals decide the most appropriate support for children.

In a full council meeting on October 8, Cllr Oliver said Surrey was investing £240m in SEND, creating 6,000 specialist school places across the county in mainstream schools and in building new special schools. He said 260 places in specialist schools have also been added for the start of the 2024 new academic year.

“This is far from the first time we have heard things along these lines,” said Cllr George Potter, one of the many council members who responded to the leader’s statement with anecdotes of poor SEND provision in their ward.

Cllr Fiona Davidson, who chairs the council’s children, families, lifelong learning and culture select committee, agreed with the leader that the council is making progress, but “extraordinarily slow progress”. She said this meant the local authority is not addressing quickly enough the needs of parents and carers of children with additional needs and disabilities.

SCC currently has around 15,000 children with EHCPs compared to about 10,000 in 2017, according to the council leader. Although Mr Oliver said the “huge rise in demand” has made it difficult for the council to manage SEND provision, he accepted there are some “local Surrey issues” such as communication problems.

Cllr Davidson said she “cannot believe” the SCC is still having communication issues with parents that it had two years ago. She added there has been “little improvement in the quality of communication” with parents, impacting the trust and relationship families have with the council.

Recommendations looking at ways SCC could improve its communication with parents found the workforce needs to be bigger to cope with the demand, more personable to parents and easier to access as well as making the EHCP process less complicated. Cllr Jonathan Essex amongst other members appealed for Cllr Oliver to implement the recommendations immediately, with Cllr Oliver responding not all of the suggestions would be pragmatic to do so.

Cllr Oliver appealed to members of the council to “not politicise” the issue of SEND provision. He argued that it is the responsibility of all members, officers, MPs and the government to help the council “deliver the best service” possible.

Image: Council Leader Tim Oliver speaking at full council meeting October 8. (Credit: Surrey County Council live stream)

Related reports:

[Give back OBE for SEND failures parents demand](#)

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[Council pays £3,900 to mother of SEND child](#)

[Surrey County failed SEND boy](#)

Surrey child misses two years of education

21 May 2025



A child missed out on two years of education due to shortages in SEND school places. Surrey County Council (SCC) has been forced to pay a mum almost £11,000 after the social ombudsman ruled there had been “excessive delay” in providing full-time suitable academic tuition.

Even as the decision was issued on 24 June, the child – who is also disabled – was still without a specialist educational placement. The local authority was found to have made a “service failure” as the child has received no academic tuition since Autumn 2022. SCC said they accept the ombudsman’s findings and sincerely apologise for any distress caused.

The ombudsman’s damning statement said: “As well as the failure to provide a school place and special educational provision, the Council failed to provide the usual education that all children expect to receive.” The report added: “The fault has caused significant injustice to the whole family and loss of education to the child.”

The mum, named Ms X in the report, complained the child’s special educational needs and disability (SEND) requirements were not being met at school. Banned from school in autumn 2022 due to their behaviour, the child received 1.5 days of alternative provision for months. The education was centred on holistic development like building confidence and creativity rather than formal academic education, according to the report.

Ms X complained to the Council in Spring 2023 that her child was not receiving any academic tuition during this period. SCC responded in Summer 2023 that a full time school place was being funded but the Council recognised Ms X’s child was not attending. SCC recognised its education offer was inadequate and agreed to increase it, offering £2400 payment to acknowledge the loss of education from Autumn 2022 to June 2023.

Despite recognising the provision was unsuitable, the ombudsman said the council had “allowed the same fault and injustice to continue from June 2023 to date”. The ombudsman judged it should not have been necessary for Ms X to come to the Ombudsman as the council “should have fixed the problems upstream”.

Legal duty remained with the council so SCC should not have relied on sourcing alternative education to the specialist school. According to the report, SCC “failed” to provide the child with special education support during their time out of school. SCC was also found wanting in showing how it tried to eliminate discrimination and advance opportunities to support the disabled child.

SCC argued that the school staff knew Ms X’s child best, but accepted it should have monitored this more closely and the provision has a ‘lack of academic focus’. SCC will pay £8,800 to Ms X, on behalf of her child, to acknowledge the impact of the lost education, calculated at £1600 per term for 5.5 terms. If SCC’s previous compensation offer of £2,400 has been paid this will be deducted.

In Autumn 2022, SCC held an annual review of the child’s educational, health and care plan (EHCP) in autumn 2022. The final review was completed in Autumn 2023, a whole year after the annual review meeting. The legal timeline for the plan to be completed is 12 weeks, yet SCC delivered the plan in 12 months. The ombudsman found the delay “excessive” and a service failure from SCC. Ms X initially received £300 to compensate for the EHCP delay in 2023, and was granted a further £200 by the ombudsman.

Despite having a year to find a specialist school place, SCC did not name a school in its new EHCP and only listed the type of school as ‘specialist’. SCC was criticised for an “excessive delay” and “service failure” in failing its legal duty to find a school placement, as only five schools were contacted in fifteen months. According to the report, there were long gaps when no consultations were sent.

SCC tried to get a specialist school placement for the next academic year (2024/25), consulting four schools last winter and during spring 2024. But Ms X said there was “no expectation” for her child to return to school for the 2024 summer term. During this time the child was still only receiving 1.5hrs of education a week.

The ombudsman said it would “expect councils to make a sustained effort to find a place for a child”, expanding its search to a wider area and independent schools if no place could be found. Although it was appreciated the number of specialist places was a national problem, the ombudsman said SCC had failed in its service.

Ms X told the ombudsman that she tries to teach her child with academic workbooks, but she does not feel equipped to do so, and that sometimes it is difficult to get her child to cooperate. Due to the time her child has now been out of school and becoming “socially isolated”, the mum said there would need to be a gradual introduction of academic work with tutors taking time to build up her child’s trust.

Ms X added the situation has impacted her other child as they cannot attend clubs or activities due to caring demands of their sibling. Ms X said she had been unable to return to work as her child has been out of school for 5.5 terms and now her income is half what it was when both her children were in school.

The ombudsman ruled “the fault has caused significant injustice to the whole family and loss of education to the child.” The report said Ms X provided additional hours of unpaid care every week to her child, which she might have been eligible

for support. SCC will pay Ms X £1500 for the impact of her being unable to work, the additional caring demands, the uncertainty and frustration for the period her child has been without education.

SCC is unable to comment on any individual children specifically, but said it is “working hard to improve services”. The Leader of SCC, Tim Oliver highlighted that the most recent Local Area SEND Inspection noted progress is underway at the council.

Tim Oliver said: “We accept the findings from the Ombudsman report and sincerely apologise for any distress caused. I am aware that the Council has not always got things right for all families, that the support and service that some children with additional needs and disabilities and their families receive is not always of the standard that we would expect, and that our communication with parents and carers needs some improvement, and I am sorry about that.”

He added: “We know how important access to full time education is for all children to support their development and wellbeing, including when this must be provided outside of school”. Mr Oliver said SCC has been reviewing its arrangements for Alternative Provision in situations where young people are unable to attend school. SCC is also pursuing a multi-million capital programme to increase the availability of, and access to high quality specialist school provision across the county.

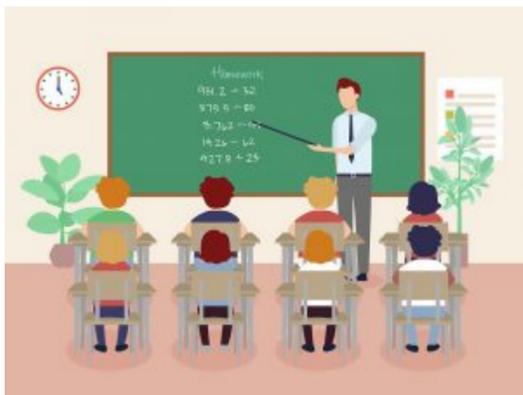
SCC said it is treating timeliness of EHCPs as a priority and has committed to spending £15m over three years to increase the capacity for key teams for EHCP. Mr Oliver said: “In line with our multi-agency EHCP Recovery Plan, we have been working hard to complete all delayed assessments and annual reviews alongside managing new applications.”

He added: “We are working closely with partners to ensure any support agreed in these plans is provided as quickly as possible, and we are committed to listening to the views of families in the completion of annual reviews and key transitions to improve outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future.”

Image: Surrey County Council headquarters. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Surrey multiplies to subtract innumerate numbers

21 May 2025



Free, flexible Multiply courses are now available for Surrey residents who would like to improve their confidence using numbers.

Around half of the UK working age population don't have strong numeracy skills, or don't feel confident about working with numbers.

Now Surrey residents can do something about it without having to go back to the classroom, (unless you want to). Multiply courses are a diverse range of free, flexible courses that have been created to help plug the numeracy gap.

They come in many different shapes and sizes, so if classrooms aren't your thing, and you'd rather do some cooking or gardening, that's absolutely possible. Or if you need it to fit in around your work and home life, that's possible too, with flexible online courses available. There's a Multiply course to suit everyone - from those who just want to feel a bit more confident with numbers in their everyday life, to those who want to get a new qualification, get a better-paying job and further their career.

Multiply courses are funded by the UK government and delivered by a range of providers overseen by Surrey County Council. Courses range from a couple of hours online, to several weeks with in-person tutoring. With a total of 15 providers and over 35 courses available (with more being added soon), there's something to suit everyone.

Individuals can sign up for a Multiply course to suit their needs, and businesses can also nominate staff who would benefit from improving their numeracy skills. The full range of courses can be seen on the Surrey County Council website with many created to fill the needs of specific industries, such as construction, healthcare and early years.

Clare Curran, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member Children, Families, and Lifelong learning, said: “Multiply courses are another tool from our skills toolbox to help improve economic outcomes for residents and businesses in Surrey. Strong numeracy skills are essential to help residents reach their potential, and businesses whose workforces are number confident can boost productivity, increase profits, and improve employee retention.

“Supporting local people to improve their numeracy skills is not only beneficial at the individual level, but also good for our communities and our economy - leading to a better quality of life for all, ensuring no one is left behind.”

Courses are starting now and will run until the end of March 2025. To qualify, learners must be based in Surrey, aged 19

or over, and not currently have a GCSE (or equivalent) in Maths.

Multiply courses can also be used by local businesses to upskill current employees, at no cost to either the learner or the business.

A full list of courses and start dates can be found on **the Surrey County Council website**.

Register your interest at <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/multiply>

Image: Preply.com Images licence

UK library cuts a concern for Epsom & Ewell?

21 May 2025



With 132 libraries closing permanently between 2016-2023 in England, there are growing concerns of further actions from local councils to make savings at the expense of public libraries. Should Epsom & Ewell be concerned?

Since 2016, the UK has witnessed a net loss of 185 public libraries from Council's statutory services. In total 132 libraries were permanently closed in England, with a further 29 expected to follow suit in 2024.

Former Children's Laureate, **Michael Rosen** has expressed great concern, stating "Every time I hear of a library being closed I find it absolutely horrifying... this seems to be like a decimation of our cultural entitlement."

Permanent closures are not the only growing worry surrounding UK libraries. Libraries Connected Chief Executive **Isobel Hunter** MBE acknowledged that "it is also a gradual reduction in opening hours, staff numbers and operating budgets that can leave libraries unable to meet the needs of their communities".

A government spokesperson responded "We recognise the pressures [libraries] face, and are committed to giving stability back to local councils so services such as these can best meet the needs of their communities."

How have libraries in Surrey and Epsom & Ewell fared since 2016?

Surrey:

Unlike several local councils, the Surrey County Council has not permanently closed any libraries since 2016. All 52 libraries are still running, 42 of which are council-run with the other 10 being community partnerships.

The Surrey County Council's 2024/25 budget indicates that they intend to enable libraries to meet the changing needs of communities while also ensuring library assets are fit and sustainable for the future.

One change Surrey has seen however is that 29 libraries are now operating with reduced hours.

Epsom & Ewell:

Of the 4 libraries in Epsom & Ewell, two are council-run (Epsom library and Ewell library). Between 2016-2023, both have been subject to the reduction of operating hours, with the council-run libraries reducing their open hours by 4.5 hours per week.

Despite the concerns of closures elsewhere, Surrey County Council is investing in several of its libraries, with Epsom library included.

A £23.2million investment for the transformation of Surrey libraries was approved by the Surrey County Council earlier this year, aiming to modernise services and create flexible spaces. Epsom, alongside Woking and Redhill, will see the creation of flagship facilities, including;

Flexible meeting rooms

Moveable partitions/walls to create workspaces

Meeting pods

New furniture

A fully flexible layout

Epsom will additionally have 'super access technology' to allow access to library services outside its opening hours (during "super access hours"). This intends to resolve the reduction of opening hours by allowing people to use the library facilities even if no staff are present. The system has a library card and pin code access point to enter the building, and self scan kiosks to check books in/out.

With works already starting, as of the 5th of August 2024, Surrey County Council expects the final completion day to be in February 2025.

Despite this investment, Surrey County Council have outlined that libraries income pressures will continue in 2024/25, as outlined in their 2024/25 Budget & Medium-Term Financial Strategy to 2028/29.

Reliance on volunteer work:

1 of the 10 community-run libraries in Surrey is the Stoneleigh Community library, which has previously suffered from cuts. In 2011 the Surrey County Council voted to let go of most of the full time staff there, forcing the library to appeal for volunteers. After the judicial technical challenge and revised proposal, the volunteer group Friends of Stoneleigh library was formed in 2013 to reopen and run the library, and as of 2016 had around 70 volunteers.

Today the library still holds regular activities and special events, acting as a social hub for the Stoneleigh community. The Friends of Stoneleigh Library offers a variety of volunteer roles from administrative work to helping the running of events.

The other community partnership library in Epsom & Ewell is Ewell Court Library, listed alongside the Stoneleigh Community Library in initial plans to reduce spending in 2011/12. Open 4 days a week, the community library offers a wide array of services, with the help of its volunteers.

Surrey's cyber sleuth students at work

21 May 2025



Cyber-curious students from Ash Manor School have been inspired to consider future careers in the sector after taking part in a special one-day workshop.

The event was hosted by Surrey County Council in collaboration with the **Surrey Cyber Security Cluster** (SCSC) and **SATRO Education Charity** as part of the **Inspire Surrey** pilot programme, and was held at the Hogs Back Hotel in Farnham.

The 'Digital Detective Challenge' was developed to harness the imagination of the students and encourage them to consider a future career in this exciting and fast-growing industry.

At the end of the day, almost all of the year 8 students taking part (28 out of 31) said they would now consider taking up a career in cyber - a resounding success for the day.

Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said: "Cyber security is a growing, highly innovative sector of huge importance to our regional economy. Events like this are fantastic to really capture the interest of enquiring young minds - the vital future leaders of this sector - and ensure cyber security's continued growth and success in Surrey. I'm delighted the event was such a triumph for all participants."

Surrey is a world-leader in cyber security, as home to a large and growing number of security firms and consultancy agencies including BAE Systems, CGI and F5.

Two of the UK's five Gold Standard Cyber Security Universities (Royal Holloway and University of Surrey) are also based in the county, helping to drive innovation in the sector.

Surrey County Council is further nurturing the sector and supporting growth through its involvement in the Surrey Cyber Security Cluster.

Mr S Coomber, Head of Computer Science at Ash Manor School, said: "Events like this enable students to explore what it's like to work in cyber security. By showcasing the breadth of opportunities available, we hope to empower students to make an informed decision about considering a career in the cyber sector."

Jane Sheridan from SATRO Education Charity, said: "Today's event was not just about solving puzzles; it was about igniting passion and curiosity for cyber careers among young minds. We wanted to provide students with a glimpse into the exciting world of cyber security while emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and problem-solving skills."

Hani Momeninia, Director of the SCSC, highlighted the significance of nurturing future talent in the cyber field. He said: "As the cyber landscape continues to evolve, there is a growing demand for skilled professionals capable of defending us against emerging threats. Initiatives like this play a crucial role in inspiring and nurturing the next generation of cyber leaders. It's been great to work with the Surrey Cyber Security Cluster and SATRO Education Charity to design and host an engaging event for our budding cyber professionals."

The event was one of a number of initiatives intended to inspire a range of audiences to consider a career in cyber by the Council's Economy & Growth Team, in collaboration with the Surrey Cyber Security Cluster. Other events included a workshop for mums returning to work and a cyber careers fair at Brooklands Museum for secondary school students across the county.

Business Surrey, the Council's new business initiative, is committed to supporting sectors, such as cyber security, with support to grow. Discover more at www.businesssurrey.co.uk.

Those businesses looking for support and advice with workforce needs can contact the team for free support at www.businesssurrey.co.uk/advice-and-support/business-support-form.

The Surrey Careers Hub also works to connect employers with schools and colleges to support young people to take their next best step. Find out how you can get involved at <https://www.businesssurrey.co.uk/workforce/careers-hub/>.

Give back OBE for SEND failures parents demand

21 May 2025



Parents say “children and families lives are at stake” after the repeated “failings” by **Surrey County Council** (SCC) over special needs provision for children. Local authorities are legally obliged to carry out Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessments for children with special needs, and have a statutory duty to deliver special educational provision.

“It needs to be like the Post Office scandal,” said **Erika** on a rainy morning outside SCC Headquarters Woodhatch Place. Five women gathered outside Woodhatch Place in Reigate to protest against SCC “failing” children with special needs. She said SCC is “flouting the law” and “criminal” for failing to provide EHC plans for many children with special needs.

One parent, **Sharren Bridges** held a placard of her daughter Jen who committed suicide in 2021, aged just 17. It read: “a multi-agency, systemic failure”, referring to the coroner’s conclusion that SCC, amongst other organisations, failed to ensure Jen’s needs were met which contributed to her tragic death.

Diagnosed with Autism and ADHD at age 10, Jen did not have an EHCP plan which reflected her mental health needs. The coroner also found that opportunities were missed to make an EHCP application at an earlier stage, to ensure she was in better educational setting.

Cllr **Clare Curran**, (Conservative Fetcham West) Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said in a press statement: “We take the findings from the Coroner extremely seriously and sincerely apologise for any part our services played in Jen Chalkley’s tragic death and the distress of all those who love her. Following the hearing, we are working hard to ensure we learn from the findings and to ensure necessary changes are made as quickly as possible.

“We are resolute in our ambition to improve services and outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future.”

Susanne Stonewood, a single mum, has paid more than £12,000 in legal fees fighting for her son’s EHCP. Her son waited 64 weeks (the legal requirement for the process is to be completed within 20 weeks) for an allegedly ‘inappropriate’ EHCP.

She told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) outside the SCC meeting that she was informed “in no uncertain terms” by a SEN professional that her son is “too academically and socially vulnerable to ever set foot in a mainstream secondary school”. Going into Year 6, Ms Stonewood is “fighting” to get the EHCP to meet her son’s needs ready for secondary school.

“SCC are blocking the process at every single stage for [educational] provision for their children.”

Parents protesting outside the council offices were also calling for the council’s Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, Rachael Wardell, to hand back her OBE.

Mrs Rachael Wardell, who is also vice president of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services for 2024/25, was awarded an OBE in the King’s Birthday Honours List. She was granted the honour due to her services to children’s social care both inside and out of Surrey.

But parents claim it is under her watch that SCC has dismissed its legal duty to support children with SEND. They argue it would send a devastating message to families and belittle their struggles and legal battles to try and secure the education children are entitled to.

Ms Stonewood said. “We feel it’s inappropriate that Rachael Wardell has been handed an OBE and she should give it back.”

More than 1,900 people signed a petition asking for her OBE award to be blocked. Many parents have commented they feel this has echoes of the Post Office scandal in which Paula Vennells was handed an OBE despite presiding over the Horizon scandal.

Cllr Curran added: “We acknowledge as a council that we have not always got things right for all families and that the service received by some children and young people with additional needs and disabilities has not always been as good as we would like it to have been. We apologise to impacted families for that.

“We are committed to continuing to improve our services and a recent Local Area SEND Inspection found that, although there is more to do, the right actions are being taken and we are starting to see progress.

Councillors **Fiona White** (Lib Dem/Guildford West) and Cllr **Robert Evans** OBE (Labour/Stanwell and Stanwell Moor) praised Mrs Wardell and Leader Tim Oliver in Surrey’s full council meeting on July 9.

Meanwhile, Cllr **Joanne Sexton** (Residents’ Association/Ashford) said parents and carers in her borough were “appalled that Surrey received an honour in the King’s birthday honours list.” She said that residents in her borough have shared their struggles with her, particularly with the fight for children’s education despite clear legislation meant to support them.



Cllr Sexton spoke of parents' and carers' "fight against the council which continues to fail to meet its legal and moral obligations". She added that parents win 97% of legal cases, "highlighting the council's systemic failure to comply within the law". Ending her statement at the council, Cllr Sexton was greeted with a round of applause from other members.

SCC has seen a 64% increase in EHCP needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of educational psychologists, and this has naturally had an impact.

Cllr Curran said they have been prioritising the timeliness of statutory assessments through additional investment and focussed work with families. The service has reduced the number of delayed EHCP requests from 1,658 in October 2023 to 56 by the end of June 2024. SCC said it has also issued over 1,500 new EHCPs this year up to the end of June.

She added: "53% of EHCPs issued in May were done so within the statutory 20 week timescale, returning Surrey rates to above the 2023 national average of 50%. We are striving to improve this further over the next few months and are aiming to reach 70% timeliness during the autumn term."

SCC was invited to comment on campaigners calling for Rachael Wardell to give back her recently-awarded OBE.

Related reports:

[King's Gongs for Surrey leaders](#)

[Council pays £3,900 to mother of SEND child](#)

[Surrey County failed SEND boy](#)

Image: Parents protesting Surrey County Council's special needs provision. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)