

Darts mathematics lesson for Epsom college students

6 March 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

6 March 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

6 March 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?

6 March 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

6 March 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

6 March 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

6 March 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

6 March 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)

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