

Surrey child misses two years of education

22 September 2024



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.

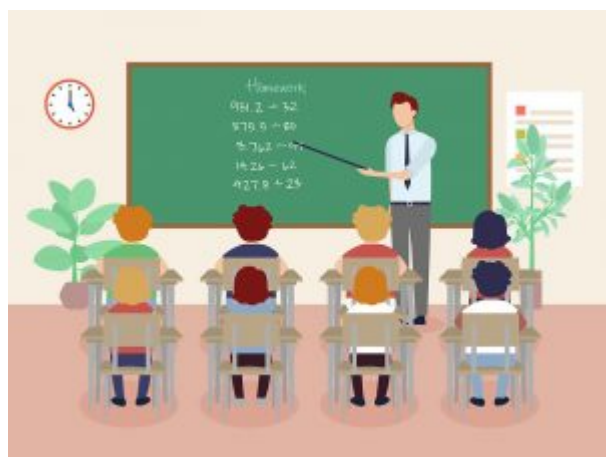
SCC said it is treating timeliness of EHCPs as a priority and has committed to spending £15m over three years to increase the capacity for key teams for EHCP. Mr Oliver said: “In line with our multi-agency EHCP Recovery Plan, we have been working hard to complete all delayed assessments and annual reviews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

22 September 2024



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>

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UK library cuts a concern for Epsom & Ewell?

22 September 2024



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

22 September 2024



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

22 September 2024



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)

Bet your boots on skill camps?

22 September 2024



Hundreds of residents across Surrey can fast track their careers for free thanks to a range of courses in nine exciting and growing sectors.

Surrey County Council is offering anyone aged 19 and over the opportunity to gain new skills and boost their earnings via a range of Skills Bootcamps.

These government-funded courses are flexible and can be completed in up to 16 weeks - meaning individuals can learn new skills easily and quickly at a time that suits them. Businesses can also use them as a low-cost way to upskill their current workforce.

More than 500 courses are available across Surrey over the next nine months, in sectors such as health and social care, gaming, cyber, construction and advanced engineering.

For most courses, no previous knowledge of the subject is required.

All offer a guaranteed interview on completion - meaning they are ideal for those looking to progress in their current role or change careers.

The first courses start this month with several Skills Bootcamps providers at the Camberley Careers Fair on Monday (July 15) at Camberley Theatre from 9.30am to 12.30pm.

Anyone can attend the event and discover more about these career-boosting courses, while also getting advice from local organisations on personal finances, starting a business and how to secure a job.

Matt Furniss, Surrey County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth, said: "Our continuous support of improving skills in Surrey is essential to our local economy. Whether learning a new skill or upskilling existing skills these free courses will help Surrey residents.

"We are delighted to have been successful in securing £2.7 million from the Department for Education to support residents improve their career prospects through these Surrey Skills Bootcamps.

"Ensuring our residents have the right skills to secure good-quality jobs in growing sectors within Surrey is vital to us maintaining our position as one of the UK's largest regional economies. These free flexible courses are a great way to do that.

"Supporting local people into great careers is good for our economy and good for our communities - ensuring we can offer a better quality of life for all, ensuring no one is left behind."

All of the Skills Bootcamps courses have been developed closely with industry to ensure they meet the future needs of local businesses and the wider economy.

Any adult living in Surrey can sign up to a course, providing they have the right to work in the UK and they can commit to completing the course.

Skills Bootcamps can also be used by local businesses to upskill current employees at a discounted rate.

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

Register your interest at **www.surreycc.gov.uk/skillsbootcamps**.

- Skills Bootcamps were first launched in 2021 by the Department for Education (DfE).

- Skills Bootcamps are one of several skills products promoted as part of Skills for Life and DfE's **It all starts with skills** campaign. This aims to get **more people to start their skills journey** by increasing supply of and demand for technical qualifications and skills offers among employers, young people and adults.
- Skills Bootcamps are now being delivered at a regional level by Surrey County Council through training providers, allowing local government to identify the skills needed for economic growth and development.
- Within Surrey, training is available across nine key sectors:
 - Cyber
 - Game development
 - Construction - insulation
 - Construction - retrofit
 - Construction - heat pumps
 - Green electrical - electric vehicles and solar panels
 - Sustainability and carbon management
 - Advanced engineering
 - Health and social care
- More information on Skills Bootcamps, including information on how to apply, can be found on the County Council website.
- You must be over 19 years of age, have the right to work in the UK and be available to study according to the cohort start and end dates (March 2025).

Epsom County Councillor win for childminders

22 September 2024



Surrey County Council (SCC) has announced a significant change in the payment system for childminders, following a successful campaign led by Residents' Association County Councillor **Eber Kington** (Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington). The new system, which will see childminders receiving monthly payments, comes as a response to overwhelming feedback from the childminding community.

Currently, childminders in Surrey receive 60% of their term's funding upfront at the start of each term, with the remaining 40% plus any necessary adjustments paid by mid-term. This staggered payment system has been identified as a barrier by nearly half of the respondents in the 2024 Early Years Provider Survey. Additionally, SCC's in-person consultation revealed that 95% of childminders favored a shift to monthly payments.

Councillor Kington highlighted the discrepancy in SCC's public messaging, which he argued favored larger group providers over individual childminders. He was approached by a childminder from his division, expressing the need for a spokesperson to advocate for a payment system that supports their financial stability and professional efficacy.

The childminder stated, "It would be good to finally have a spokesperson who can support us in calling for a change and enabling us to make a choice in how we are paid, so we are able to continue doing our jobs to the best of our ability, without worrying how or when we will be able to pay our mortgages."

Councillor Kington emphasized the importance of this change, especially in light of the upcoming expansion of early years entitlement, which will require more childcare places. He argued that ensuring a reliable payment system is crucial for recruiting and retaining childminders.

After lobbying the Council, Councillor Kington raised the issue at the July Council Meeting. In response, Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children, Families, and Lifelong Learning, confirmed that SCC is transitioning to a new software system for early education payments. This system, set to be implemented in September 2024, will include the option for monthly payments.

Following the meeting, Councillor Kington expressed his satisfaction with the outcome. "This is excellent news, but it is a shame that childminders have had to work hard to get the change despite the clear evidence of need shown in SCC's own consultation results," he said.

The move to monthly payments aligns SCC with other local authorities, such as the London Borough of Sutton, which already offer this option to their childminders. This change is expected to provide greater financial stability and support for childminders, enabling them to focus on delivering high-quality care without the added stress of managing inconsistent payment schedules.

Image from www.childcare.co.uk

The cost of sending pupils to school

22 September 2024



Surrey County Council (SCC) has been ordered to pay out £1,500 by the social care ombudsman for a ‘service failure’ in defaulting its legal duty to provide SEND transport to and from school. The local authority is already predicted an overspend of £7.3m on SEND school transport for its 2024-25 annual budget.

A family has received £1,500 after Surrey County Council (SCC) failed to provide a child with complex medical needs school transport adding pressure to the family. The boy missed 27 days of education as well as special needs provision, causing his mother and the wider family “avoidable” distress.

The provider suspended the child’s transport after no longer feeling able to meet the boy’s change in medical needs, on June 15, 2023. The boy waited for his school transport to pick him up the next morning but it did not arrive to collect him. It was not until lunchtime until the travel provider informed the Council that it had suspended its service.

SCC speedily offered the mum a travel allowance while it explored longer term solutions but she felt ‘pressured’ into taking this as she did not have the time to recruit carers. The travel allowance is a more cost-effective option than managed transport services.

Report documents detail the “avoidable distress, frustration and inconvenience” that the child’s transport withdrawal caused his family. The social ombudsman said “the council did exactly what we would expect in the circumstances it found itself in” and it now has contracts with two ambulance-style providers able to transport children with complex medical needs.

A SCC spokesperson said it would not comment on individual cases and “although the report does recognise that we put appropriate mitigations in place, we accept the findings from the Ombudsman report and sincerely apologise for any distress caused”.

They added: “We know how important it is for children and young people to have access to their education setting, however a lack of suitable providers has meant that some children who require specialist provision for high and/or complex medical needs have had to wait longer for appropriate arrangements than we would like. In these circumstances we always work actively with families to find a solution and offer measures such as personal travel allowances in the interim.”

The ombudsman demanded the council pay his mother £1,000 in recognition of his missed education and SEN provision during the period he had no transport to school, plus £500 for the ‘avoidable distress’ it caused her and her family.

An overspend of £7.3m, all based on home to school transport, is already predicted one month into SCC’s new budget for 2024-25. In 2023, SCC saw an overspend of £12m on SEND transport, with nearly a third of the transport costs being to independent schools outside of Surrey.

Rising demand, more travel days and anticipated increase in the number of children who need transport have contributed to a pressurised budget. SCC said it is reviewing all discretionary travel arrangements, tightening applications and is actively promoting personal travel allowance to manage costs.

A SCC spokesperson added: “We have seen a 64% increase in education, health and care needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, which has naturally had a knock on effect with a year on year increase in demand for Home to School Travel Assistance (HTSTA) as many children and young people with an education, health and care plan require HTSTA. This has resulted in a predicted overspend for this service.”

Image: Credit: Arriva436 CC BY-SA 2.0