

Surrey County Council death throes debate

19 March 2026



Tensions boiled over in the council chamber as outgoing Surrey County Council leader Conservative Cllr Tim Oliver defended his administration and staff against accusations from local MPs and opposition councillors. He accused them of “cheap political mudslinging” against “the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others”.

Speaking at the final full council meeting before the May elections, Cllr Oliver said a “small number of recently elected MPs have crossed the line multiple times” despite repeated attempts to engage with them on sensitive issues and the complex services the council provides.

Liberal Democrat MPs said after the meeting they make “no apologies for sticking up for residents”.

“They continually undermine the work of dedicated expert staff, largely from a position of naivety and ignorance, all to try and score political points,” Cllr Oliver said. “Cheap political mudslinging impacts the very people dedicating their working lives to helping others.”

Cllr Oliver read aloud the words of a staff member from the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Directorate, describing how political attacks felt like a “personal blow”. He read: “Most people will never see the hours spent untangling difficult cases, the compassion behind tough decisions, or the sheer persistence required to get things right [...] Words have consequences beyond political point scoring.”

The criticism comes after a damning BBC report revealed the county council had been formally sanctioned by the SEND tribunal in 38 cases over a five-month period. The council said barring notices were issued during an “exceptionally high period of activity”, according to the report. An ITV report claimed Surrey adults with learning disabilities face “dangerous” cuts to care; meanwhile the council insists it is increasing investment in the service and encouraging people to speak up if they feel the assessment does not meet their needs.

Cllr Oliver has urged MPs to engage constructively with staff and warned that the workforce would not easily forget years of political attacks. “While you may claim that your words are not directed at officers, I’m afraid there is no avoiding the impacts of cheap politicisation of serious and complex work,” he said.

A statement later issued after the meeting read: “Liberal Democrat MPs make no apologies for sticking up for their constituents’ interests and raising the failures of Surrey County Council, whether it is SEND provision, safeguarding, adult social care or potholes.

“No Surrey MP mentioned SEND in Parliament before 2024. They were all Conservative. As soon Liberal Democrats were elected in 2024 we relentlessly focused on making people’s lives easier in Surrey – as we were elected to do. We hope the Leader of Surrey will work with us in trying to achieve that instead of his blatant electioneering.”

Opposition councillors also pushed back. Cllr Paul Follows said he was “bored of the ‘let’s not be political’ speeches followed by a version of ‘everything is fine and nothing is broken’.” He acknowledged Cllr Oliver’s desire for a professional approach to the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) but said implying scrutiny from MPs or councillors was “unwelcome” and “simply a waste of everybody’s time.”

Clashes continue

The debate quickly turned into a wider clash over finances and priorities. Liberal Democrat councillors questioned whether the council’s debt levels and budget planning were as secure as Cllr Oliver claimed, while Cllr George Potter described the leader as “thin-skinned” and accused him of dodging accountability by apparently “cancelling elections”.

Despite the tension, Cllr Oliver called for a focus on collaboration across party lines. “Residents don’t want to get caught in the crossfire of politics,” he said. “They want their elected representatives to improve their lives, not score points.”

As Surrey approaches its first Unitary Council elections in May, the row highlights the delicate balance between navigating political rivalries and council staff reputation, all while preparing for a major shake-up of local government. By the time Surrey’s County Council meets again, the political map will look very different.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Local LibDem leader slams Helen Maguire MP in shock resignation

19 March 2026



In a shock development in the politics of Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrat Council Group Leader Cllr **James Lawrence** (College Ward) has resigned from his Party and joined the growing Independent Group on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

The Independent Group, led by former Residents Association Councillor **Alex Coley** (Ruxley), has been joined by ex-LibDem and long serving Councillor **Julie Morris** (College) and former Residents Association Councillor for Nonsuch Ward, **Christine Howells**.

The Liberal Democrats once formed the largest opposition group on the Council. Now the group is the smallest. The Independent Group has four councillors, Labour four and the Liberal Democrats just two.

The first version of this report overlooked the little known fact that Cllr **Chris Watson** (Ewell Court) defected from the RA to Labour on 10th February this year.

The Residents Association remain predominant with the remainder of the total 35 seats in the Chamber.

In Cllr James Lawrence's resignation letter he takes wounding Parthian shots at both Epsom and Ewell's first woman and first Liberal Democrat MP **Helen Maguire**, who was elected in the July 2024 General Election and her Party's leader. He pulls no punches in his critique of Sir **Ed Davey**, MP for Kingston-Upon-Thames.

Resignation letter of Cllr James Lawrence

Dear Resident

I joined the Liberal Democrats in 2018 because I believed that the Party had both the strong intellectual foundations Britain needs and the pragmatism to achieve them. A principled commitment to liberalism, socially responsible markets, and devolved power differentiated the Liberal Democrats from other parties. Moreover, the Party's understanding that it existed to influence politics from the outside by winning public support for important issues was tried and tested.

In 2023, I decided to play an active role in this mission and stood for election. I was fortunate enough to win and become a councillor representing College Ward. Serving the community where I grew up has been a great privilege. I'm proud to have co-led a cross-party coalition working for better outcomes at the Chalk Pit site, increased Council lease scrutiny, and passed a motion requiring all urgent council decisions to be published. Navigating an overly complex housing payments system to keep a roof over the head of a vulnerable resident is an experience that will stay with me.

While I have been doing all I can to serve our community, I have unfortunately been undermined by both the national and local Liberal Democrats Party. Under Ed Davey's leadership, the Party has become rudderless. What do the Liberal Democrats stand for? I wish I could tell you. Davey's Mr. Tumble-style stunts cover up a lack of direction, policy, and commitment to seriously engage with the challenges this country faces, particularly the economy. As the two-party system collapses, the Liberal Democrats should stand to benefit. But Davey's Party is incapable of taking advantage, and given its purposelessness, that's probably a good thing.

Locally, I have been disappointed with our Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament who seems more interested in leafleting and electioneering than engaging in meaningful policy change at the national level. Having worked with the MP closely on local matters, I am also concerned by her ability to alienate volunteers who freely give up their time. While I was pleased to support the successful campaign to displace the Conservatives in Epsom and Ewell, I now feel a sense of guilt at having played a role in enabling her to be elected.

For these reasons, I am resigning from the Liberal Democrat Party with immediate effect. I sincerely hope that the Party returns to the seriousness of its past, but I unfortunately no longer have faith it will. I will continue to serve the people of College Ward and the Borough to the best of my ability as an Independent councillor.

James Lawrence

In response Helen Maguire has issued the following statement:

I understand that Cllr James Lawrence has decided to step away from the Epsom and Ewell Liberal Democrats and will finish his term as an independent.

While I wish him well in his future endeavours, I am saddened to see his portrayal of my values and priorities as a Member of Parliament working for local matters at a national level.

The feedback I receive from local residents is consistently positive. I frequently receive correspondence from constituents who value the regular literature they are sent informing them of the important work I am conducting in Parliament. It is equally vital to me that constituents know how accessible and visible I am as their MP, engaging with them on their doorsteps each week. It is because I am an MP who strives to be a truly present voice within Epsom and Ewell that I am able to understand these concerns and raise them at a national level.

I recently met a constituent during one of my canvassing sessions, who told me that they were having difficulties accessing a breast cancer drug. I raised this issue directly with the responsible Minister, who then intervened with our local NHS organisation, and consequently the constituent received their medication. I do not need to debate the merits of consistent canvassing when the importance of it is so clear in cases such as this.

I am proud to be a very visible and active Member of Parliament within the Epsom and Ewell community, and will continue to fight for every single one of my constituents at both a local and national level.

Helen Maguire MP

Sam Jones - Reporter



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Epsom MP sponsors special youth art in Parliament

19 March 2026



Surrey young people using NHS mental health services have taken their artwork to the heart of government, with an exhibition at the House of Commons offering MPs an insight into their experiences and the support they received.

The exhibition, taking place from 10-15 February, showcases work created by young people supported by the STARS and New Leaf services, part of Mindworks Surrey. STARS supports young people affected by sexual abuse and assault, while New Leaf supports those who are in care, leaving care, adopted or under special guardianship orders.

Young people are sharing their artwork with MPs to showcase how creativity supports young people's mental health and to highlight the positive impact of the services.

The pieces explore identity, hope, growth and recovery, capturing what can be difficult to articulate in words and offering an honest reflection of young peoples' lived experiences of mental health support.

One young person whose artwork is being exhibited said: “STARS has changed my life, I can be me now. I was shocked when I heard my art would be at the House of Commons, I am really proud that people like my picture and what I created.”

Rebecca Robertson, Specialist Mental Health and Art Therapist said: “The young people we support have expressed their thoughts and feelings around their life experiences using art materials.

“Art making can provide an important alternative to more traditional verbal therapies and can be a vital part of helping young people to engage in support, particularly when working with trauma.”

The House of Commons event was sponsored by **Helen Maguire, MP for Epsom and Ewell**, who attended the exhibition last summer and supported bringing the art to Parliament.

Helen said: “I’m delighted to see this exhibition come alive. It demonstrates the powerful work that New Leaf and STARS do and the importance of young people getting the right care and support for their mental health.”

Emina Atic-Lee, Service Manager for STARS and New Leaf services, said: “We are incredibly proud to see the voices of the young people we support take to the stage at the House of Commons. Each piece offers an honest and powerful window into how young people use creativity to make sense of their experiences, express emotions that are hard to put into words, and recognise their own strength.

“To showcase this work in such a nationally significant setting is a truly special moment for them and for everyone involved in the services.”

Press release from Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Epsom and Ewell’s MP champion’s Friends of Horton Cemetery mission on “Time to Talk Day”

19 March 2026



On the edge of Epsom lies Horton Cemetery — quiet, overgrown and easy to miss. More than 9,000 people are buried there. Most never had headstones. Many never had visitors. Almost all were patients of the former Epsom Cluster of psychiatric hospitals, men and women whose final resting place reflects how society once viewed mental illness: something to be hidden, managed and ultimately forgotten.

In 2026, on Time to Talk Day, [5th February] Horton Cemetery forces us to ask an uncomfortable question: how far have we really come?

Horton Cemetery was created to serve what was once the largest cluster of psychiatric hospitals in Europe. At its height, the Epsom hospitals housed thousands of people with severe mental illness, learning disabilities and complex needs. Those who died without family or money were buried together anonymously. This was not ancient history. Horton Hospital closed in 1997. Some of those buried there lived into the late twentieth century — into the era many of us think of as modern and progressive.

Sites like Horton Cemetery challenge us to ask not just whether we are talking more openly about mental health, but whether we have truly confronted the stigma that shaped places like this, and whether we are prepared to protect the dignity of those still buried there.

Today, the cemetery has been sold to a private owner, with hopes of future development. Like many historic pauper burial sites nationwide, it sits under pressure from land values and planning decisions. I have urged the government not to grant exhumation licences at Horton Cemetery and to properly safeguard similar sites as places of remembrance, not obstacles to development. These are not empty plots. They are graves. How we treat them matters, because how we remember the dead reflects how we value the living.

Friends of Horton Cemetery, families, and Professor Alana Harris of King’s College London have worked tirelessly through initiatives such as the Lost Souls Project, which seeks to recover the names and stories of those buried anonymously in former asylum cemeteries. Their work is a quiet act of justice — restoring identity where the system erased it, and dignity where stigma once prevailed.

But local efforts can only go so far. That is why there are growing calls for a national memorial to those who lived and died in Britain’s historic mental health institutions. Such a memorial would not rewrite history, but it would acknowledge it, signifying that now is the time to talk.

Time to Talk Day is often framed around everyday conversations — a coffee and a chat, a poster on a train reminding us to check in on loved ones. These things matter. They help chip away at silence and shame. Horton Cemetery asks us to go further.

Epsom tells the story of how this country has treated mental illness. It was once the centre of a system built on isolation and control. Today, it hosts the headquarters of the Samaritans — an organisation rooted in compassion and listening. That journey should give us hope. But it also gives Epsom, and Horton, a responsibility. If we are serious about confronting mental health stigma, this is one of the places where that conversation must begin.

Because today, people with severe mental illness still face some of the deepest inequalities in our society. Recent data paints a stark picture: those facing the longest waits for mental health care are now waiting nearly two years — an average of 658 days — more than twice as long as people waiting for elective physical health treatment. The consequences are devastating. Adults living with severe mental illness, including bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, have a life expectancy 15 to 20 years lower than the general population.

These are not abstract statistics. They reflect lives cut short, needs unmet, and a system that still too often talks about people with severe mental illness rather than listening to them.

The Government now has the opportunity — and the responsibility — to show that mental health reform means more than warm words. Safeguarding sites like Horton and recognising the historic mistreatment of people with mental illness would be a powerful signal that dignity is not conditional and remembrance matters. I look forward to discussions with ministers about how we protect Horton Cemetery and similar sites across the country — not as relics of an uncomfortable past, but as places of reflection and learning.

Time to Talk Day should not only ask whether we are speaking openly. It should ask who we are hearing, whose voices are still missing, and whether, finally, we are willing to restore dignity to those whose voices were never heard.

Horton Cemetery is a quiet reminder that stigma thrives in silence. In 2026, are we ready to listen to what it is telling us?

Helen Maguire MP



For further information about the work of the charity The Friends of Horton Cemetery visit their website [HERE](#)

Image: Horton Cemetery with former patients photos

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The New Year view from Westminster

19 March 2026



From Epsom and Ewell Member for Parliament - Helen Maguire

The new year often brings a quieter moment. A chance to take stock once the noise and festive chaos of December fades. This year, that moment felt especially important to me.

Politics in Britain feels deeply unsettled right now, and the wider world even more so. One day brings news of geopolitical relationships breaking down in violent and inhumane acts; the next, warnings of democratic fragility from our neighbours across the Atlantic. It can all feel relentless. I don't blame anyone who feels disillusioned, or let down by establishments

and leaders that are meant to provide stability and reassurance. I feel that frustration myself at times.

When that sense of turbulence sets in, I remind myself where my focus belongs. My responsibilities are not abstract; they are here. My priorities and primary interest are with the people of Epsom and Ewell, my community. That clarity matters. It keeps my work grounded, and it shapes what my work in Westminster will be this year.

One tangible example of that focus is recent progress on the issue of pavement parking. Residents have raised this issue with me consistently since before my election in July 2024, and for good reason. Obstructed pavements are not just a minor inconvenience; they affect people's safety. Parents with pushchairs, wheelchair users, people with visual impairments, and older residents are often the ones forced into the road just to get by.

After sustained campaigning, both locally and in Parliament, we are finally going to see meaningful change. This month, the Government gave councils new powers to tackle problematic pavement parking. What this means is that councils, not the police, can act where pavements are clearly blocked or unsafe, without long, street-by-street processes every time. Here's what it doesn't mean: this is not a blanket ban. Councils can still allow exemptions on narrow or busy residential streets where pavement parking is genuinely needed.

This is an important change that puts safety and accessibility first. I'm proud of this progress, not just for the outcome, but for what it represents: local voices being heard and practical problems taken seriously. I was pleased to receive recognition of my campaigning in a letter from Lilian Greenwood MP, the Minister for Local Transport, announcing the changes, and this year my priority will be ensuring that this change is implemented properly and consistently.

Another issue that comes up repeatedly is antisocial behaviour. This can take many forms, from vandalism and loud noise to the misuse of shared spaces. These issues can quietly have a real impact on our community and sense of belonging.

One specific concern constituents raise with me regularly is the growing problem of illegal or unsafe e-scooter use. I hear from parents worried that pavements or public pathways are no longer safe, and from older residents who no longer feel confident on their quick walk to the shops. One parent described a moment where their young child was mere millimetres from being knocked over by an e-scooter travelling far faster than it should have been, on a pathway it had no business being on. I dread to think what kind of irreparable damage could have been done if it weren't for just a few millimetres of space.

When e-scooters are used responsibly and legally, they can have a place in society. But reckless riding and a lack of coordinated enforcement create real and costly risks. Last year I worked with campaigners, police and transport partners to push for a more cohesive, joined-up response to the problem. This isn't about targeting young people or stifling new technology; it's about, as with the pavement parking issue, ensuring our public spaces are safe for everyone who uses them.

For anyone doubting just how much devastation an electric scooter can bring to someone's life and family, I would encourage them to read about Jacob's Journey, and the powerful work his mother Carly is doing as a result.

My work as Primary Care and Cancer spokesperson continues alongside my constituency campaigns, and the two remain closely intertwined. I will continue to fight for better healthcare across the constituency, whether that is through better access to GP appointments or timely treatment for cancer patients.

If there is a running thread through my priorities this year, it is a belief in the value of steady, practical action that is tangible for every single member of the Epsom and Ewell community. In the uncertain times ahead, the basics matter more than ever: safe streets, responsive public services, and a more affordable cost of living. I will continue to work hard delivering this for our constituency.

Helen Maguire MP



Epsom & Ewell MP presses government on firearm licensing safeguards

19 March 2026



Epsom & Ewell's MP **Helen Maguire** led a Westminster Hall debate on 28 January calling for tighter safeguards in the firearms licensing system, with a particular focus on making *medical markers* on GP records mandatory for gun licence holders.

Opening the debate, Ms Maguire set out the case for reform by referencing a series of fatal incidents where legally held firearms were used, including cases with direct relevance to Epsom & Ewell. She told MPs that the issue was not about restricting lawful gun ownership, but about closing gaps in safeguarding where warning signs were missed.

"This is a missed opportunity to save lives," she said. "A missed opportunity to safeguard vulnerable adults with access to firearms and protect public safety."

Local tragedy cited in Parliament

In a powerful and emotional passage, Ms Maguire referred to the double murder and suicide connected to **Epsom College**, a case that attracted national attention in 2023. She told the House:

"Gemma and her daughter Letty Patterson, who lived in my constituency, were shot and killed by Gemma's husband almost three years ago, before he turned the gun on himself... If they had [been able to intervene], maybe Gemma would still be working at Epsom College and Letty might have celebrated her 10th birthday this year."

Ms Maguire argued that the perpetrator's use of online medical services meant that neither his GP nor the police were aware of changes in his mental health when his shotgun licence was renewed.

Case for mandatory medical markers

Medical markers are digital flags on GP systems indicating that a patient holds a firearm or shotgun licence. They are intended to prompt doctors to consider whether changes in a patient's mental or physical health should be shared with police firearms units.

Although such markers are now available, their use by GPs remains voluntary. Ms Maguire said that this undermined their effectiveness:

"There is currently no obligation on GPs to use this marker. Their use is left to best endeavours... This cannot be allowed to happen again."

She cited support for mandatory markers from a wide range of bodies, including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of GPs, shooting organisations and police representatives. Quoting survey evidence, she added that "87% of existing certificate holders believe GPs should inform the police if they become aware of a change of health which could impact a certificate holder's ability to safely own a gun."

Balancing safety and rural life

Anticipating concerns from rural MPs, Ms Maguire stressed that her proposals were not an attack on shooting sports or countryside livelihoods.

"Our country is home to proud rural communities and individuals who rely on gun ownership for their work," she said. "This debate is in no way about firearm ownership... Today's discussion is on how we can ensure medical professionals have the information required to best support the individuals they serve."

She pointed to other licensing regimes, such as driving licences, where medical fitness is routinely monitored in the public interest.

Government response

Responding for the government, the Minister acknowledged the tragedy at Epsom College and confirmed that thousands of digital medical markers are already being applied each year. However, he stopped short of committing to make them mandatory, arguing that existing data suggested most GPs were using the system appropriately.

Ms Maguire challenged that position directly in the debate, asking: "If we're saying there's no additional cost to it, then I'm struggling to understand why it's difficult to change the position."

In her closing remarks, she expressed disappointment at the government's stance and warned against complacency: "I do not want to be here again talking about another incident. And I truly hope the Minister will go away and really consider this."

The debate concluded with broad cross-party support for the principle of stronger safeguards, even as ministers resisted calls for immediate legislative change.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Helen Maguire MP speaking in the Westminster Hall debate. Parliament TV

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Problem Pavement Parking Powers Promised

19 March 2026



The Government has announced plans to give councils across England new legal powers to tackle pavement parking, following years of concern from disability groups, parents, and local campaigners about blocked pavements forcing people into the road.

In a statement issued on 8 January, the Department for Transport said the changes are intended to make it easier for local authorities to restrict pavement parking across wider areas, rather than relying on street-by-street restrictions that can be slow and complex to introduce.

The Department said blocked pavements create serious barriers for wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs, blind or partially sighted people, and older residents, limiting independence and making everyday journeys less safe. Ministers say the new approach will allow councils to act where pavement parking causes the greatest local problems, while retaining flexibility where limited pavement parking may still be considered acceptable.

Local Transport Minister Lilian Greenwood said clear pavements are essential for people to move around safely and independently, and that councils will be given the power to “crack down on problem pavement parking” while taking account of local conditions. National organisations including Guide Dogs and the RAC welcomed the announcement, calling for consistent enforcement and proportionate use of the new powers.

Surrey County Council: details awaited

Responding to questions from Epsom and Ewell Times, Surrey County Council said it welcomed the announcement but stressed that it is too early to comment on how it might operate in practice.

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said the authority is “looking forward to finding out more about new powers allowing local authorities to tackle antisocial pavement parking,” but added that further detail is needed on what exactly is proposed and what the powers will entail once introduced. The council said it would be happy to revisit the issue once more information is shared by the Department for Transport.

The Government has said that guidance on how councils should use the new powers will be published later in 2026.

Local MP claims campaign success

The announcement was welcomed by Epsom and Ewell MP **Helen Maguire**, who described it as a significant step forward following sustained local and parliamentary campaigning.

Ms Maguire said she had raised pavement parking repeatedly in Parliament, including through a Westminster Hall debate, an Early Day Motion, written questions to ministers, and local campaigning with residents. She said pavement parking makes streets unsafe and inaccessible, and that no one should be forced into the road when walking to school or the shops.

Following the announcement, the Minister for Local Transport wrote directly to Ms Maguire, thanking her for her advocacy and citing her work in highlighting the challenges caused by pavement parking.

What powers already exist?

At present, pavement parking outside London is not subject to a general nationwide ban. Enforcement relies on a patchwork of existing powers, which can be limited or difficult to apply.

Yellow line parking restrictions, for example, apply from the centre of the carriageway to the highway boundary, which usually includes the pavement. However, these restrictions only apply during the signed controlled hours and do not always prevent vehicles from mounting the pavement if enforcement is not prioritised.

Councils can also act where a vehicle causes an obstruction of the highway, an offence under existing road traffic legislation. In practice, enforcement is often reserved for cases where access is completely blocked, such as preventing wheelchair passage or emergency access. This can leave many partially obstructed pavements unaddressed.

Local authorities may also introduce specific Traffic Regulation Orders banning pavement parking on individual streets or sections of road, but this process can be time-consuming, requires consultation and signage, and is rarely applied borough-wide.

The Government has said the new powers are intended to move away from this piecemeal approach, allowing councils to introduce area-wide pavement parking restrictions more easily, while still permitting exemptions where pavements are wide enough and pedestrian access is not compromised.

What happens next?

The Department for Transport says further guidance will be published later this year, setting out how councils can use the new powers in a proportionate and locally appropriate way. Until then, councils such as Surrey County Council say they are unable to comment on how enforcement might change on the ground.

For residents in Epsom and Ewell, the announcement signals political momentum on an issue that has generated long-standing concern, particularly with food delivery mopeds in the Epsom High Street area, but any practical change to enforcement will depend on the detail of the legislation and how quickly local authorities choose to act once the new framework is in place.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Image: Delivery moped on pavement in Epsom

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Pavement Parking: Epsom & Ewell MP Speaks Out

MP warns as 3,600 Epsom homes face fuel poverty

19 March 2026



More than 3,600 households in Epsom and Ewell are estimated to be living in fuel poverty this winter, according to new figures that have reignited debate over the Government's decision to scale back national home-insulation funding.

The estimates come in the same week the Chancellor announced cuts to the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) scheme, a long-running programme that funds energy-saving improvements such as insulation in low-income households. Government data indicates ECO has delivered 1,866 installations locally, helping families reduce heat loss from older homes that are often poorly insulated. Local MP Helen Maguire said withdrawing support now would leave "thousands of families in draughty homes and facing high bills" at a time when many residents already feel financially stretched.

Fuel poverty is measured by comparing a home's required energy costs with household income. National charities warn the UK remains one of the worst-insulated housing stocks in Western Europe, meaning households are more vulnerable to spikes in market energy prices. Despite a fall in wholesale gas costs over the past year, Ofgem confirmed that bills remain significantly above pre-crisis levels, and several support schemes introduced during the 2022-23 energy shock are winding down.

Analysts at the Resolution Foundation have noted that around half of the temporary support announced in the Budget is due to expire within three years. Separate modelling by climate think-tank E3G suggests reducing the scope of ECO could prevent up to a million homes nationwide from receiving insulation improvements over the next four years and may lead to job losses in the retrofit and construction sector.

The Government has argued that its energy efficiency targets remain in place and that the Budget decisions reflect wider fiscal pressures. Ministers say additional measures to stabilise wholesale prices and support low-income households will continue. But campaigners and industry groups have expressed concern that cutting insulation programmes risks higher long-term costs for both consumers and the state, as poorly insulated homes require more energy to heat.

Helen Maguire said residents are already reporting that "they feel poorer by the day" and called on ministers to back a more ambitious national upgrade scheme. The Liberal Democrats are advocating an emergency programme offering free

insulation and heat pumps for people on low incomes, alongside removing the Renewables Obligation levy from electricity bills. The party claims that breaking the link between gas and electricity prices and scaling up home retrofit work could halve household energy bills by 2035.

As temperatures fall, local authorities, charities and advice services expect increased demand from households struggling to balance heating costs with other essential spending. Nationally, fuel poverty campaigners continue to urge the Government to treat insulation as an infrastructure priority, warning that winter pressures will persist until the UK's older housing stock is modernised at scale.

Sam Jones - Reporter



Surrey home extension charges aired in Parliament

19 March 2026



“Complex and inflexible” rules that unintentionally and “unfairly penalise” homeowners with six-figure fines “for the apparent crime of building a home extension” will be reexamined, the housing minister has said.

The problem of Community Infrastructure Levy charges being unfairly or disproportionately applied to homeowners has inflicted pain on dozens of Waverley residents with the borough council saying it is tied by Government guidelines on how to enforce the charges.

The charges are supposed to help offset the impact of large scale developments in an area - and help fund the infrastructure to support it.

In Waverley, dozens of homeowners have found themselves inadvertently caught in the tangle of bureaucracy. One resident, Steve Dally was stung with a £70,000 ‘contribution’ with others threatened with imprisonment or having their homes repossessed.

The issue came to a head this week in Parliament with Godalming and Ash MP Sir Jeremy Hunt raising the matter to housing minister Matthew Pennycook.

Sir Jeremy said: “My constituent Steve Dally was charged £70,000 by Liberal Democrat-controlled Waverley borough council for the apparent crime of building a home extension. I met the housing minister earlier this year to talk about abuse of the community infrastructure levy. Could he update the House on his plans to stop it?”

Mr Pennycook told the commons that he agreed there had been a number of “unintended consequences of the 2010 CIL regulations—they have unfairly penalised some homeowners.

“I can only reiterate the commitments I gave him during that meeting. In principle, we are committed to finding a solution to this issue, and I am more than happy to meet him again and update him on the steps we have taken in the interim.”

The news has been welcomed by Waverley Borough Council, which has set up its own discretionary review panel to examine cases of wrongdoing - although uptake has been extremely slow with only two cases coming forward so far.

Councillor Liz Townsend, Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for planning and economic development said: “We welcome the recent comments made in Parliament by the Housing Minister acknowledging the unintended consequences of the current Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) regulations.

“The legislation is overly complex and inflexible, and like many residents we are frustrated by a system that can leave homeowners facing large bills for genuine mistakes. We have been pressing the Government for reform for some time, so it is encouraging to hear a clear commitment to finding a solution.

“While national legislation limits what councils can do, we are doing everything possible to support our residents. She added: “The case of Mr Dally, which was raised in Parliament, was one of the situations that highlighted the need for change.

“Following discussions with him, the council reviewed his case and concluded that his CIL charge should be withdrawn and refunded. His experience helped shape the introduction of our Discretionary Review Scheme, so that other residents would have a clear route to request a review.”

The council said it would continue to lobby Government for urgent reform to ensure the CIL system “is clearer, fairer and more proportionate for homeowners” and called for the collaborative work between themselves, Sir Jeremy and ministers “to help shape a fairer and more compassionate system that still supports local infrastructure.”

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Godalming and Ash MP Sir Jeremy Hunt in parliament raising the issue of CIL injustice (Parliament TV)

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Epsom MP leads cross-party delegation to Ukraine to examine impact of explosive weapons

19 March 2026



A cross-party delegation of UK Parliamentarians has travelled to Ukraine to assess the humanitarian and environmental impact of explosive weapons and to strengthen cooperation between the two countries on mine clearance and victim support.

The visit was led by **Helen Maguire**, Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Epsom & Ewell and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Explosive Weapons and Their Impact. The group also included Cameron Thomas MP for Tewkesbury and Baroness Natalie Bennett of the Green Party.

During their visit, the delegation met Minister Oleksi Sobolev, responsible for Ukraine’s economy, agriculture and environment, to discuss the challenges of clearing more than 136,000 square kilometres of land now contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance — roughly a third of Ukraine’s territory. They also visited Ukraine’s State Emergency Service, which has responded to over 235,000 explosive incidents since the start of the war, rescuing more than 6,500 people.

The MPs observed mine clearance operations with the HALO Trust and Mines Advisory Group (MAG), and learned about new training programmes in explosive ordnance disposal and emergency response being developed at Lviv State University of Life Safety. They also visited rehabilitation centres Superhumans and Unbroken, which provide prosthetics, surgery, and psychological support to civilians and veterans injured by explosions.

Speaking from Ukraine, Helen Maguire said: “As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Explosive Weapons and Their Impact, it has been a privilege to visit Ukraine with cross-party colleagues to observe both the unimaginable devastation caused by explosive weapons, and the extraordinary courage of those working to clear them.” She added “Ukraine faces one of the largest demining challenges in history. Witnessing the bravery of the women and men working to clear this contamination has been deeply humbling. Britain must continue to support the Ukrainian people by championing humanitarian mine action and ensuring our foreign policy reflects the real human cost of explosive weapons.”

Maguire also met **Anatolii Fedoruk**, Mayor of **Bucha**, the town that became a global symbol of Russian atrocities against civilians after the withdrawal of occupying forces in 2022. Hundreds of civilians were killed there, many showing signs of execution and torture. Maguire reflected:

“Witnessing first hand the damage and loss caused by landmines has been sobering, but I’ve been heartened to know that the contributions from my own community — through **Surrey Stands With Ukraine**’s financial support towards rehabilitation for landmine victims — will have made a tangible difference to survivors of these atrocities. I’m proud to represent a constituency whose compassion knows no borders.”

Bucha holds a particular link with Epsom, as the local charity Surrey Stands With Ukraine (SSWU) — based in the town — was among the first UK groups to send aid there following the liberation of the area in 2022. Its director, Lionel Blackman, visited Bucha in July 2025, meeting the Mayor and local officials and other urban centres and aid workers to assess ongoing needs and rehabilitation projects. The charity has delivered more than £4 million worth of humanitarian and medical aid to Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion.

Global context: Ukraine among the world's most landmined nations

Ukraine now ranks among the most heavily mined countries on Earth, joining the grim company of Cambodia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Syria. The United Nations and the HALO Trust estimate that contamination across Ukraine affects an area larger than England, Wales, and Northern Ireland combined. At the current pace of clearance, it could take decades to make all affected areas safe.

Globally, Cambodia remains one of the most mine-affected nations, with around 1,000 square kilometres still contaminated despite 30 years of clearance. Vietnam and Laos continue to suffer from the legacy of the Vietnam War, where unexploded ordnance from U.S. bombing campaigns still kills or injures civilians every year. In comparison, Ukraine's contamination has occurred over a much shorter period — highlighting the devastating intensity of Russia's use of explosive weapons in civilian areas.

The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) continues to fund demining organisations in Ukraine through its Global Mine Action Programme, which supports both the HALO Trust and MAG in their life-saving work.

You can follow the work of Surrey Stands With Ukraine and make donations [HERE](#)

Sam Jones - Reporter



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[Sir Ed supporting Epsom based Ukraine charities](#)

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[2 years on Epsom to gather in solidarity with Ukraine](#)

["Imagine this house is in Epsom" says our man in Ukraine.](#)

Image: Helen Maguire MP with LibDem Party leader Sir Ed Davey and Surrey Stands With Ukraine Chairman Roy Deadman at the "Ukraine Hub" in Global House (courtesy The Ashley Centre) the HQ for the charity and the Epsom and Ewell Refugee Network in November 2024.

Not MPs' expenses again!?

19 March 2026



Some Surrey MPs have racked up thousands of pounds in hotel stays or London rent, despite their constituencies being within commuting distance of Westminster.

The rules allow MPs who live outside London to rent a property or book hotels if late-night votes or early starts make the journey "unreasonable". Hotel bills are capped at £230 a night in London. But many Surrey residents might see the distances involved as a "normal" daily commute.

According to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), **Zöe Franklin (Liberal Democrat)**, MP for Guildford, has claimed £3,919.42 for 18 nights in London hotels between September 2024 and April 2025 - roughly two stays a month. **Dr Al Pinkerton (Liberal Democrat)**, MP for Surrey Heath, has claimed £4,543 for 22 hotel stays in the same period, including a four-night stint last October costing £780 and five separate nights this April. **Will Forster (Liberal Democrat)**, MP for Woking, spent £367.84 on a two-night stay in February after returning from a parliamentary trip to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, some of their Conservative colleagues have other arrangements. **Greg Stafford (Conservative)**, MP for Farnham and Bordon, has reportedly spent £9,592.52 on accommodation over five months, including nearly £8,000 to rent

a London property between November 2024 and March 2025, excluding council tax and utility bills. Travelling from Mr Stafford's constituency office in Farnham and Bordon takes on average 1 hour 25 minutes by car or 1 hour 50 minutes by train. Mr Stafford has been approached for comment.

Under IPSA rules, MPs can claim expenses for renting or staying in London when parliamentary business requires it. Up to £31,800 a year is available for MPs' accommodation budgets in such cases.

Other Surrey MPs take a different approach. **Jeremy Hunt (Conservative)**, MP for Godalming and Ash, owns a London property, while **Claire Coutinho (Conservative)**, MP for East Surrey (Tandridge area), has her own London flat. Neither claims rent or hotel expenses.

A spokesperson for Zöe Franklin said: "Zöe has stayed in overnight accommodation in London after late night sittings in Parliament. This is in line with IPSA guidance. Zöe will continue to focus on working hard and delivering for the people of Guildford constituency."

A spokesperson for Will Forster said: "Will stayed in a London hotel for two nights in February 2025 following his return from Ukraine as part of a parliamentary delegation to mark the third anniversary of the Russian invasion. Debate in the Commons on the following day extended late into the evening."

A spokesperson for Dr Al Pinkerton said: "As Surrey Heath is classed as an out-of-London constituency, Dr Pinkerton is entitled under IPSA rules to claim accommodation costs in London when parliamentary duties require it. Rather than renting a permanent flat, he has chosen to use hotel accommodation on an occasional basis - for example, when late-night votes or early morning meetings make commuting impractical. This approach provides flexibility and ensures costs remain within IPSA's set limits. It also enables Dr Pinkerton to maximise his effectiveness as Surrey Heath's representative by being present and fully engaged in parliamentary business while avoiding unnecessary expenditure."

Emily Dalton LDRS

From **top left going clockwise**:

1. **Zöe Franklin** (Liberal Democrat, Guildford)
2. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Liberal Democrat, Surrey Heath)
3. **Greg Stafford** (Conservative, Farnham and Bordon)
4. **Will Forster** (Liberal Democrat, Woking)

Photos from UK Parliament

Poll points to further Conservative decline in Surrey

19 March 2026



Reform UK is in line to win its first Surrey seat, according to a major YouGov poll. The survey of 13,000 people's voting intentions suggests three Surrey MPs would lose their jobs with the Liberal Democrats being the largest beneficiaries in the county - if a General Election was called today.

Nationally, the polls say the United Kingdom is headed for another hung parliament with Reform, the Nigel Farage led party that succeeded UKIP after Brexit, emerging as the largest party. In Surrey voters are leaning a different way.

The three Surrey seats that would switch allegiance would be Spelthorne, Farnham and Bordon, and Godalming and Ash. All three seats are currently held by the Conservatives with Lincoln Jopp, Greg Stafford and Jeremy Hunt projected to lose their jobs as the Tories crumple to just 45 MPs.

Projected to take their places would be two Liberal Democrats and Surrey's first Reform MP. If the voting patterns held true Dorking and Horley, Woking, Guildford, Esher and Walton, Godalming and Ash, Epsom and Ewell, Surrey Heath, and Farnham and Bordon, would all go to the Liberal Democrats to give them eight MPs.

The Conservatives would hold East Surrey, Reigate, Runnymede and Weybridge, and Windsor, to give them four MPs. While Reform UK with 27 per cent is expected to edge out the Conservatives on 25 per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 20 per cent to win Spelthorne.

Nationally YouGov's seat-by-seat analysis indicates Reform UK would secure 311 seats in the Commons, short of the 326 required to demand a majority but far and away the largest party - and 306 MPs more than it currently has. The poll has

Labour dropping from its 411 landslide victory in 2024 to 144 with the Lib Dems on 78 and the Conservatives which had been in Government for 14 years prior before losing last year would slip to 45 seats.

YouGov says its seat projections come with uncertainty and that volatility is now the norm in British electoral politics. They say Reform UK would win at least 82 seats by less than five percentage points and that there was a possibility it could lose them all, leaving the party well short of a parliamentary majority rather than within touching distance.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Epsom and Ewell MP calls for SEND action

19 March 2026



Helen Maguire MP for Epsom and Ewell renewed her call for immediate government action to address the crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services, following her attendance at both the *Fight for Ordinary SEND* rally on Parliament Square and the Westminster Hall debate on *Children with SEND: Assessments and Support*, held on 15 September 2025.

At the Parliament Square rally, Ms. Maguire met with parents and carers who shared deeply troubling accounts, including cases in which children appear to have been removed from the register for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), despite ongoing and substantial need. Families also raised concerns about long waiting lists, lack of specialist provision, and inconsistent support from local authorities.

A key piece of evidence cited by rally-attendees relates to new findings from the *Centre for Justice Innovation* (CJI). According to CJI's literature review and follow-up research:

- A very high proportion of children who are sentenced by criminal courts have identified SEND. For example, one statistic shows that **71%** of children sentenced between April 2019 and March 2020 had identified speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).
- More broadly, children with SEND are significantly overrepresented throughout the youth justice system: amongst those cautioned or sentenced for offences (including serious violence), over **80%** have been recorded as ever having special educational needs; for prolific offenders it's even higher.
- Barriers to effective diversion have been consistently highlighted: children with communication or learning difficulties are less likely to be diverted out of the formal justice system because their needs are either unrecognised or misinterpreted as behavioural problems.
- The CJI reports that data on SEND in diversion programmes is patchy, with inconsistent recording, varying assessment tools, and a lack of standardisation, which obstructs accountability and improvement.

These findings underline how failures in early identification, assessment, and support not only impact children's education but may also increase risk of contact with the justice system.

Westminster Hall Debate & SEND Petition

The Westminster Hall debate *Children with SEND: Assessments and Support* took place, prompted by a petition titled "*Retain legal right to assessment and support in education for children with SEND*", which attracted over 122,000 signatures. The petition calls on the Government to maintain existing legal protections (including the EHCP process) and improve the timeliness and quality of assessments.

MPs from across parties spoke powerfully about how delays in EHCP assessment, weak enforcement, and underfunding are leaving children and families without vital support. Some remarked on whether changes being mooted to the law may reduce legal guarantees for EHCPs—something campaigners have strongly opposed.

Case Example from Helen Maguire in Debate

During the debate, Helen Maguire shared a case from her own constituency:

"Four-year-old Maeve lives in my constituency and has cerebral palsy. She requires constant care, is unable to walk, has

limited speech and has multiple ongoing medical conditions that require attention. Despite that, and despite the fact that her parents applied to Surrey County Council almost a year ago, the council has refused to even assess her for an EHCP. She started school last week, but still does not have an agreed plan in place.”

This story underlines how delays and refusal to assess are not abstract problems—they are happening now and affecting young children with complex needs.

What Must Be Done

Helen Maguire is calling on the Government to take the following measures urgently:

1. **Restore and protect the legal rights associated with EHCPs**, ensuring that children who need assessments receive them promptly, and that the process is enforced.
2. **Increase funding** to SEND services and local authorities, especially for specialist care, speech and language therapy, and other supports that are in short supply.
3. **Shorten waiting lists** and reduce the backlog of assessments, so that children are not forced to begin school (or continue schooling) without the plan and support they are legally entitled to.
4. **Ensure better data and transparency**, particularly in diversion and youth justice settings, so the over-representation of SEND children is properly understood and addressed.
5. **Improve training** among professionals in education, local government and justice system sectors so that SEND is identified and accommodated, not misinterpreted as misconduct or behavioural issues.

Helen Maguire MP said: “We are seeing families shattered by delays, by refusals to assess, by thousands of children starting school without the support they clearly need. The statistics show that without early intervention, children with SEND risk falling into a system that is not equipped for them. The Government must act now—not in months, but immediately—on funding, waiting lists, and legal rights. Our children deserve nothing less.”

Sam Jones - Reporter



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[Surrey MPs slam SEND profiteers](#)

[£4.9 million not enough to solve Surrey’s SEND problems?](#)

[Surrey sent on a U-turn on SEND by MPs?](#)

Pavement Parking: Epsom & Ewell MP Speaks Out

19 March 2026



3rd September Helen Maguire, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, spotlighted in a Parliament debate a pressing local frustration: pavement parking.

A Daily Struggle on Our Footpaths

Maguire painted a vivid picture of everyday life here in Epsom & Ewell—where pavements are meant to be safe, shared spaces, but too often become obstacles.

According to Guide Dogs UK, four out of five blind or partially sighted people report difficulty walking on pavements at least once a week, and 95% have been forced onto the road because vehicles encroach even slightly. For wheelchair and

mobility scooter users, this alarming figure leaps to 99%. Even parents aren't spared: 87% say they've had to step into the road, and 80% would walk their children to school more often if pavements weren't blocked.

Maguire also revealed a telling local anecdote: on one evening alone, a constituent counted 23 mopeds and motorbikes cluttering a pavement, forcing people into traffic and weaving in and out unpredictably. It's these small moments that undermine our sense of safety—and, by extension, our freedom.

The Patchwork of Laws

Here's the head-scratcher: pavement parking is banned in London (for fifty years) and across Scotland unless your council specifically says otherwise. But elsewhere in England, the rule is reversed: it's allowed unless a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) is put in place—a long, expensive local process.

Driving onto pavements is already illegal under Section 72 of the Highways Act 1835—but, as Helen pointed out, few people even know the finer points of the law. One survey found just 5% of drivers understand all aspects.

A Consultation Left Hanging—and Growing Frustration

It's now nearly five years since the government ran a consultation titled *Pavement parking: options for change*, which closed in November 2020. It proposed everything from simplifying the TRO process to introducing a national default ban—but still, there's been no government response or action. Helen called on ministers to act before the consultation's fifth anniversary rolls around this autumn.

Lessons from Closer to Home—and Farther Afield

London and Scotland show what's possible: clearer rules, better enforcement, safer walking spaces. In Scotland, since the Transport Act 2019 came into force, councils have issued thousands of fines—raising almost £1 million in the process, with Edinburgh alone accounting for around £441,000, and showing that civil enforcement works.

Meanwhile, in England, research from Guide Dogs underscores the human cost—injuries, forced urban detours, isolation—and Living Streets found that 65% of drivers admitted to pavement parking, while 43% had done so in the past six months.

What It Means for Epsom & Ewell

For our residents—those with visual impairments, mobility challenges, parents with prams—the pavement should be a path to independence, not a blockade.

Maguire's plea is clear: she wants a national default ban on pavement parking—one that gives the police and councils clarity, hones enforcement, and safeguards community spaces.

What Could Come Next?

- A national ban as the starting point, with councils able to allow exceptions where needed.
- Proper powers for civil enforcement—think PCNs—not just confusing laws in dusty books.
- A public campaign: educating drivers, building understanding, reducing dangerous impromptu parking.
- Local upgrades to pavements: smoother, wider, safer—so more of us feel confident walking around Epsom & Ewell.

Related report:

[Epsom High St in need of more love?](#)

[Deliveroo drivers outside McDonalds Epsom](#)

Surrey MPs slam SEND profiteers

19 March 2026



A new analysis of Surrey's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision reveals growing concern over spiralling costs, limited local authority capacity, and soaring profits among private providers - all while many children with special needs remain without adequate support.

The situation has drawn particular attention following the release of financial data from companies operating independent special schools across the UK, including in Surrey. The Witherslack Group, which operates Bramley Hill School in Tadworth, reported a turnover of £208 million and an operating profit of £44.6 million this year – up from £172.8 million turnover and £34.8 million profit the year before. Some private providers, backed by private equity firms, have posted profit margins exceeding 20%.

In contrast, Surrey County Council – responsible for delivering education for over 16,000 children in the county with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) – faces an ongoing struggle to balance growing demand against limited state sector capacity. The Council’s own figures show that last year, it spent **£122 million**—almost half of its **£270 million high needs block grant**—on placements at non-maintained and independent schools.

The root of the issue lies in a long-standing shortage of suitable local authority-run SEND schools, which has left the Council heavily reliant on private sector provision. That reliance has come at a cost, both financial and human. According to Council data, **1,809 children in Surrey were recorded as being out of school for over a third of the time during the 2023/24 academic year**. Campaigners and parents report delays in assessments, a lack of transparency in placement decisions, and limited accountability from some providers.

The County Council has committed to increasing in-county SEND provision. Its **SEND Capital Programme**, launched in 2020, aims to create **1,500 new maintained school places by 2030**, with hundreds already in development. But critics argue progress is too slow, and that excessive profits among private providers are draining funds that could otherwise support local services.

Surrey’s six Liberal Democrat MPs – Al Pinkerton, Chris Coghlan, Helen Maguire, Monica Harding, Will Forster, and Zöe Franklin – have now called for a **legal cap on profits** made by private SEND providers. They propose a maximum margin of **8%**, aligning with figures cited by the Office for National Statistics for average business profitability. The same threshold has also been suggested by the Education Secretary in the context of children’s social care reform.

In a joint statement, the MPs said:

“It is completely unacceptable that the top private SEND providers in Surrey are lining their pockets by exploiting a system that has been left in crisis by repeated failures from the Conservatives. Supporting places at non-maintained independent schools accounted for £122 million last year – money that could go further in public provision.”

“We are deeply concerned to see this greedy profiteering from private equity firms, especially when parents across Surrey are raising serious concerns about standards and support at some schools, including Bramley Hill.”

Surrey County Council has not commented directly on the profit figures but continues to highlight its strategic commitment to invest in new local SEND places. Its latest SEND Partnership Strategy focuses on co-producing services with families, improving timely access to support, and reducing reliance on high-cost placements. However, significant financial risks remain. In February, the Council acknowledged its high needs block deficit was continuing to grow, even with Government intervention schemes such as the “Safety Valve” programme.

Meanwhile, media scrutiny continues to follow the role of private companies in special education nationally. The BBC recently investigated complaints involving private SEND schools, and MPs including Monica Harding have raised questions in Parliament about accountability and off-rolling practices.

Parents and campaigners across Surrey continue to call for stronger regulation, more timely provision, and long-term investment in inclusive education. As one parent told *EET*: “We need a system that puts children first – not shareholders.”

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