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Child psychological waiting in Surrey eats savings

5 October 2023



Families are using their “savings and holiday money” to pay for private educational psychologist assessments having been told they would wait two years for an assessment through the council, a select committee has heard.

One councillor said all families who had been told they faced a two-year wait and had opted to fund a private assessment should get their money back and Surrey County Council would fork out for the refund.
Questions were also raised about how well the council was communicating with parents over eligibility and the scheme to refund parents, at a meeting of the county council’s children, families, lifelong learning and culture select committee on Monday (October 2).

The meeting heard about the steps being taken to reduce the wait times for children getting an education, health and care plan (EHCP), which is put in place to ensure children with additional needs or disabilities get the provision they need at school.

In 2022, Surrey was completing just 26 per cent of EHCPs within the legally required 20-week timeframe, down from 65 per cent in 2021. The council is aiming to be back over the target of 60 per cent of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks by the end of May 2024.

For the summer and autumn terms of 2023, a temporary reimbursement offer is in place for parents, up to a maximum of £925, where private advice has been obtained and where no further Surrey County Council professional advice is required.

The offer is part of the steps being taken to try to improve the council’s speed of getting through EHCPs, with a shortage of educational psychologists being one of the factors behind the delays.

Councillor Rachael Lake (Conservative, Walton) said she had been in contact with a family who were told in summer 2022 there would be a two-year wait, and challenged the policy of only allowing reimbursements in specific circumstances. Cllr Lake said: “Last summer when this family was told that it was a minimum two year waiting list, in writing, they chose to use their family savings and holiday money for an assessment which Surrey County Council has accepted in its totality and has acted upon, for which they are extremely grateful. Had they not spent this money, they would be one of the people still waiting this summer with another year to go.”

She said she thought it was “wrong” that this family could not apply for the money to be given back to them, saying she thought any family told they would have a minimum of two years to wait should be eligible.

One parent spoke to the select committee and said they only became aware that private assessments could be considered on September 22 ,when they were told by the caseworker helping with their daughter’s request.

The parent was sent a link to a web page which no longer existed and said she had only found out that there had been an extension to the eligibility criteria when asking questions ahead of the select committee meeting.

She said: “I commend the committee’s efforts to try and reduce waiting lists, but without effective communication, both internally to your staff and externally, the decisions and policies that you make are meaningless.”

The meeting’s chair said it was clear the council had a “challenge communicating with parents and carers”.

Cllr Fiona Davidson (Residents for Guildford and Villages, Guildford South-East) said: “I’m not sure that we’re really tackling it as effectively as I think everyone would choose. On behalf of the committee, I would certainly ask if there was a renewed focus on those communications.”

Assessments for EHCPs will be carried out in chronological order, starting with those who have been waiting longest, except for more vulnerable children, where there is a safeguarding concern, or where they are due to transfer to the next phase of their education, which are being prioritised for completion on time.

Documents show that in order to catch up with the outstanding EHCPs, the county council will need to issue 330 overdue EHCPs in September, 321 in October and 260 in November.

The number of overdue plans being issued per month will be over 200 until May 2024, when it is forecast to drop to 86, compared to 147 which should be completed on time and meeting the 60 per cent target.
But documents also show that this target can only be achieved if the demand for assessments for an EHCP reduces.

The county council will focus on meeting needs “at the earliest opportunity”, with more language and communication support for reception classes.

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The county council's leader said before the meeting that, with access to appropriate support services at an earlier stage, families might not need to go down the road of getting an EHCP.

Cllr Tim Oliver (Conservative, Weybridge) said "looking through the other end of the telescope" could lead to "low level" support given earlier on and building a "more resilient, preventative system", as well as allocating funding to those already in the system.

He added: "I accept that it's a challenging process for parents. It's not really their first choice."
While the cabinet member education and learning, Cllr Clare Curran (Conservative, Bookham and Fetcham West), told Monday's meeting she was "really confident" the plan to catch up on overdue EHCPs was realistic and could be achieved. But she said it would be put under pressure if there were a "massive increase" in new requests coming forward, or if there were a large number of staff leaving roles, as happened in 2022.

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