



Council deficiencies costing Surrey schools

Schools are spending tens of thousands of pounds trying to support children with additional needs amid delays to assessments from **Surrey County Council**.

One headteacher said a child waiting more than a year for an education, health and care plan (EHCP) meant the school had spent £40,000 to support him, which impacted on the whole school's budget.

Delays to the plans, which are legal documents outlining the support required for children with additional needs, are "time consuming, stressful and distressing" according to one parent.

Surrey County Council's timeliness on completing the plans has dropped in the past 18 months, meaning now just 26 per cent are completed within the legally-required 20 weeks.

Surrey is ranked 128th out of 152 authorities in terms of EHCP timeliness according to Department for Education data.

The starting point, a parent requesting an assessment for a plan, is followed by various assessments of the child, with a shortage of educational psychologists being an important factor in delays to EHCPs.

One parent said she was warned about delays to assessments at the start of her request for an EHCP for her child in October last year. She told a meeting of the county council's children, families, lifelong learning and culture select committee on Thursday (July 20) parents felt like they were in a "perpetual fight" to get things done.

Having had a stage two complaint upheld, she said a communications protocol that should be in place was not being followed, and that having done a count, she had followed up with what was now her second caseworker around 20 times.

She said: "It's incredibly time consuming, it's stressful, it's distressing. When I get responses from my caseworkers, who I know are incredibly overworked, they say: 'Thank you for your patience'. "To which I reply to say I do not feel patient anymore. I am impotent to do anything about this because I've had a stage two complaint upheld and nothing changes."

She said despite educating herself, "despite being on top of it, and being organised and keeping a record of every communication and the dates of all of those communications" she couldn't make things go any more quickly. But she said the impact was mostly on her child who would be starting a mainstream secondary school which may or may not be able to meet his needs because the needs assessment had only just taken place.

The meeting also heard from a school headteacher, **Sarah Carrington**, of Stoughton Infant School, who said staff felt like there was an expectation to "always do more with less" and which impacted on workloads and wellbeing. She said it was "significantly challenging" in schools currently, probably the most she had seen in 22 years, and that teachers understood there was a rise in EHCP applications.

In Surrey, meeting documents show, there was an increase of 64 per cent in requests for assessment since 2020.

Mrs Carrington said: "It's my belief that we all need to work together, the educators, the health service, the local authority, to solve these issues we are currently facing, to improve the experience of our children. We're all aware that it isn't up to standard and that children are currently being really let down."

She told of one child who had been waiting for 55 weeks, 25 weeks longer than the legal timescale, for an EHCP. Saying the support the school had put in place for the pupil had cost around £40,000 without funding, and that there would be no back funding for it, she added it therefore impacted on the whole school budget.

Cllr **Jonathan Essex** (Green, Redhill East) said he'd been to the Earlswood Federation of schools, one of the largest primaries in the county, where governors estimated there was a 50-month funding deficit for EHCP provision, calculated at £32,000.

The cabinet member for education at Surrey County Council, Cllr **Clare Curran** (Conservative, Bookham and Fetcham West) said the authority was "acutely aware" it was not meeting the needs of children and families in the county. She added: "I'm really sorry about that. I know it is causing distress and worry to a lot of families, and it pains me to say that and I really do apologise to them."

The county council's executive director - children, families and learning said the council had been given additional funding from the Department for Education, but outlined that the funding that came through from central government was not allocated for the time that children were waiting for plans to be completed.



She said for several years in Surrey the authority had been overspending on dedicated funding received from government for schools funding, and supplementing government money through council budgets.

Rachael Wardell said: "Councils across the country as well as Surrey, are finding themselves existentially threatened by the debts that are being accrued in order to fund the support." She told the meeting it wasn't clear why the various factors playing into delays with EHCPs had created a "perfect storm" in Surrey. She said the process could only be "as fast as the slowest assessment".

A cabinet meeting to be held on Tuesday (July 25) will make a decision on increasing funding for more educational psychologists to help with the delays, as part of an action plan to bring wait times down.

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