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How to cut the County's cake?

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A Surrey MP challenges the cuts the County makes to supporting children with special educational and disability needs (SEND), in a classic how to cut the County Council's cake dilemma. Chris Caulfield LDRS reports.

Surrey County Council "may be in breach" of statutory duties over its decision to cut respite breaks for parents of children with special educational needs. The county council redesigned its short breaks services and has been able to maintain its provision of overnight care but, with the budget frozen at 2017 levels, cuts had to be made elsewhere.

It wrote to care providers saying it was freezing payments from April this year and issued a statement saying it was only "able to fund two-thirds of the current capacity in community-based play and youth schemes for children with disabilities".

Parents left furious and on the brink as they struggled to find ways to balance full-time care needs and work have been given a glimmer of hope by Runnymede and Weybridge MP Ben Spencer.

Dr Ben Spencer, MP for Runnymede and Weybridge, has written to Surrey County Council. Credit SurreyLive/Grahame Larter.

In a letter to a constituent, he said: "I have now written to Surrey County Council regarding their new policy on short breaks. I share your concerns about the impact the new policy will have on families. I understand the importance of short breaks and am grateful for you taking the time to raise these issues with me.

"Since receiving the response from Surrey CC and doing some research I am concerned that Surrey CC's new policy may be in breach of their statutory duties. "These duties are set out in the Children Act of 1989 include specific references to breaks for carers."

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said the decision to freeze – rather than cut- funding was an "important decision" given the "real challenge for public finances" and that the authority understood the importance of these services for children, young people and their families.

They said: "We have a statutory duty to deliver a balanced budget and this means we have not been able to increase the budget for short breaks services at this time, in line with inflation.

"We understand the concern this may cause families and we are pleased to announce that we have been successful in securing £907k of Short Breaks Innovation funding for 2023/24 from the Department for Education.

"This will enable us to deliver some enhanced short breaks services for children and families with more complex needs in 2023/24, which we believe will make a real difference. Whilst there will still be changes to services, we hope this additional funding will be welcome news to families.

"This funding will be allocated to services that meet the highest level of need. In particular, we are committed to maintaining current capacity of overnight respite services for children who have been assessed as needing them, so that we fulfil statutory commitments in children's care plans."

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