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5th November 2026

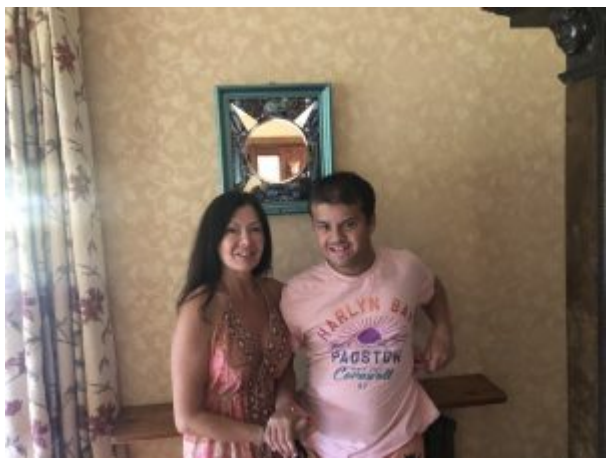
ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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School transport early term teething problems

11 September 2023



Families have been left without school transport for the start of term despite **Surrey County Council** promising to “learn lessons” after pupils were left stranded last year.

One parent of a 19-year-old with severe learning difficulties said she “stopped mentioning” going back to school to her son once she realised transport probably wouldn’t be in place in time for the start of term.

Georgie Morris said her son, Greg, missed the first four days of his school term, but has now had confirmation that he will be able to get to school on Monday (September 11).

She first had transport approved for Greg, who has a placement at a New Malden college which is the nearest suitable place for him, in June.

But having waited through the summer for details to be confirmed she claims she was told the day before Greg was due to go back on September 5 that there was no transport in place.

Having spoken to someone at the county council on Thursday, September 7, Georgie then had Greg’s transport confirmed.

Despite some families not having transport sorted for the start of the new term Surrey County Council bosses say “significant improvements” have been made since last year but admitted there were issues with finding providers for a small number of children who require specialist provision due to their needs.

There are also more than 350 applications waiting for travel arrangements, but a council spokesperson explained these were from 544 applications made in August. So far more than 170 have been dealt with, with the remaining ones on track to be assessed within the 30 day timescales.

But she said Greg, who is non-verbal, has severe learning difficulties and global developmental delay, is bored at home, and needs the stimulation school brings.

She said: “I tell him ‘It’s so many sleeps until school’, so he was geared up to go to school. Once I realised this wasn’t going to happen, I just stopped mentioning it, we just carried on with the holidays.”

She couldn’t drive Greg from her Dorking home to the college, saying she doesn’t always have access to the car, and it would be too stressful for her. But once she had the transport confirmed, she said she “instantly felt okay”.

Georgie told the LDRS: “I’m lucky in the fact that I can chase and I’ve got the wherewithal to kick up a stink and to get things done, but a lot of these parents don’t.”

She worried about other parents, some of whom may have additional needs themselves, or might not know where to turn.

While she’s sympathetic with staff at the council who have a “very difficult” job to do, she said better accountability and communication were needed.

A county council spokesperson said: “There is a small cohort of children who require specialist provision for high and/or complex medical needs that, due to a lack of suitable providers, are waiting for appropriate arrangements. “We are in direct contact with these families and are actively working with them to find a solution. Measures such as personal travel allowances have been offered in the short-term.”

In May, councillors were warned that the county council needed to tackle a £12million overspend on school transport “to avoid adversely impacting services”.

A review following issues at the start of the 2022 school year led to 50 recommendations for the authority, as councillors heard that families were turning to food banks in the face of delays and suffering an impact on their mental health.

Councillor **Clare Curran**, cabinet member for education and learning, told a select committee meeting in December she didn’t “underestimate” the task at hand, but was “confident” that by this September families wouldn’t “suffer the failure” of the 2022 start to the year.

A council spokesperson told the LDRS this week: “Significant improvements have been made regarding the assessment and planning of families’ transport arrangements, and addressing the challenges faced previously. We are not currently experiencing any application or travel delivery backlogs, and across the last six months 95% of applications were assessed within our agreed timescales.

“All applications for home to school travel assistance received prior to 31 July were processed, and families had their

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ISSN 2753-2771

travel arrangements communicated to them, before the start of the autumn term.”

Families with specific complaints and enquiries are urged to call the council’s Contact Centre on 0300 200 1004 so it can investigate.

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