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Surrey MPs unite against County on SEND silence

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Surrey MPs have slammed the council for apparently closing down discussions on constituent SEND cases. In a rare case of unity between parties, both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have written separate letters to Surrey County Council criticising its decision.

The letter comes after MPs were advised last week that Surrey County Council "will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available". But a council spokesperson said the most suitable route for parents wanting to challenge a decision is by a formal appeal.

Posting on X, formerly Twitter, Zöe Franklin, Lib Dem MP for Guildford said: "This latest correspondence is further proof of the council's contempt for children with SEND requirements across our county." Lincoln Jopp, the Conservative MP for Spelthorne, wrote on Facebook: "It is deeply troubling that Cllr Curran has written to all Surrey MPs seeking to restrict the level of engagement Surrey County Council will have with us on SEND matters. This decision risks families not getting the real help they need."

Surrey County Council has come under fire in recent years for having one of the highest SEND tribunal appeal rates in England. Around 198 SEND-related complaints have also been upheld against it by the Local Government Ombudsman since the start of 2022.

The county council's most recent Ofsted SEND area inspection found that children with SEND had "inconsistent experiences and outcomes". But the Surrey authority would say it is on an improvement programme and is significantly investing in supporting SEND children both inside school and out.

The Lib Dem MPs claim many parents come to them with their case "only after they have exhausted all routes or have been unable to receive a reply". Liberal Democrat MPs Al Pinkerton, Chris Coghlan, Helen Maguire, Monica Harding, Will Forster and Zöe Franklin have written to Surrey County Council's Cllr Clare Curran to express serious concerns over the council's new policy on Special Educational Needs (SEND) casework.

The Lib Dem letter read: "The decision to sever communication between our offices and the Council contradicts the principles [of improving outcomes and processes] and ultimately harms the very people we are all here to serve: the residents of Surrey."

The Lib Dem MPs claim the council did not contact the group in advance to discuss her concerns before making this decision which effectively closes a vital avenue through which desperate families have previously sought help. They urged Cllr Curran to change her mind and continue a constructive relationship.

Conservative MPs Dr Ben Spencer, Rebecca Paul, Lincoln Jopp, Greg Stafford, Jack Rankin, The Rt. Hon. Claire Coutinho and The Rt. Hon. Sir. Jeremy Hunt have also penned a letter to the cabinet member to voice their concerns. The Conservative politicians said that "limiting engagement with MPs who advocate for constituents in this way is likely to be concerning for the public".

Similar to their Liberal counterparts, the Tories explained consistent complaints raised by their residents were based on communication in sharing updates, following legal time frames and chasing up consultation responses. Claire Coutinho MP said she spent "around a third of my constituency surgeries helping parents dealing with SEND and EHCP cases."

The Tory MPs' letter noted that Dame Kate Dethridge, the DfE's regional director, saw MPs' inboxes as a "useful weathervane" on whether the council's system is working.

The MPs wrote: "Where these issues arise, and particularly there appears to be a pattern or repeated concerns being raised, we must be able to advocate and engage, both on individual cases and on policy and service delivery issues." But, the Tories added that if the decision stands, they would like further clarity on the scope of future engagement with MPs.

Cllr Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning said: "We know and appreciate the important role MPs play for their constituents, and value strong relationships with our MPs, both about council services and policies, and their advocacy on behalf of Surrey to the national government. We have clear channels of communication between all Surrey MPs and the council.

"The recent communication sent to all MPs was to remind them that the correct process for families who are dissatisfied with a final council decision is to challenge it by way of a formal appeal. This is the appropriate and most effective route for families, and information on how to do this is always included when families are notified in writing of the council's decision."

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