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Surrey ratches up record fines for education failures

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Surrey County Council is on pace to be hit with more than £1 million in fines and redress payments due to its repeated failures within its education service over the last two years. The council says the system doesn't work for families, schools, or local authorities – and has lobbied the government for changes, additional funding, and urgent reform.

The "record-breaking" fines, which have climbed from £47,000 in 2020 to more than half a million pounds last year and almost double its previous high of £258,730 in 2023, show the council has "lost control and continues to put vulnerable people at risk," according to opposition leaders. Now, Surrey County Council has paid £239,510.75 in financial remedies in the first six months of this financial year – putting it on track to hit £470,000 for the full 12 months and a million pounds in the past two years. The majority, £220,965.00, relates to its education services, with the largest individual payments arising from complaints about missed education or missed provision, reports show. These are made when a child is unable to attend school because appropriate or alternative support has not been provided, or where the provision agreed in an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) has not been put in place.

The three largest individual remedies paid out so far this year are about £11,000, £8,900, and £8,353 – primarily in recognition of time missed. The largest fine or payment in its Children's Social Care services so far is £8,325.12, in relation to "errors."

Clare Curran, Surrey County Council cabinet member for children, families, and lifelong learning, said: "We are working hard to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be. Provision and support for children with SEND is a systemic issue that councils up and down the country are grappling with. The national system is not working for families, schools, or councils, and we and other bodies are consistently lobbying the government for wider system changes, additional funding, and urgent reform."

She said the council had also been working to improve the service with £15m put into a "three-year multi-agency recovery plan" in 2023, which was "now showing clear performance improvements." Cllr Curran added: "The volume of stage one complaints received in the first six months of this year has decreased compared to the same period in the last two financial years, reflecting the efforts made by services across the council to resolve complaints early on and in the timeliness of responses. We also recognise that delays in issuing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) have historically contributed to missed provision and subsequent fines, however progress is being made in this area too.

"Our average EHCP timeliness levels in Surrey over the six months from September 2024 – February 2025 is 72 per cent, well over the national average of 50.3 per cent. We have also caught up on the backlog of Education, Health and Care needs assessments, and over 75 per cent of overdue annual reviews have now been brought up to date. We expect these improvements to start having an impact on the number of Local Government Ombudsman cases in the near future.

"We are resolute in our ambition to continue to improve services and outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe, and confident about their future."

Councillor Paul Follows, Liberal Democrat group leader at Surrey County Council, said the authority had been promising to fix children's services for years but has had little to show for it so far. He added: "Surrey County Council have for years been promising families that they would get a grip of children's services and SEND provision, and as these record-breaking fines indicate, they have lost control and continue to put vulnerable people at risk."

New Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

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