

Surrey's education failings cost £1 million

Surrey County Council's failings have cost the authority more than £1m in fines and redress payments over the past two years – the vast majority within its education services, newly published figures show.

In 2020/22, the council paid out £104,630, followed by a small decline in 21/22 to £92,698. That leapt to £258,730 in 22/23 and hit a peak of £540,611 last year before falling back this year to £480,797. The majority of its recent payouts, 93 per cent, were connected to delays or failures in its Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process, including delays in issuing EHCPs, missed or incomplete provision outlined in plans, or breaches of statutory timeframes for assessments and reviews.

Payments typically fall into two groups: fault in service provision, such as delays in EHC needs assessments, calculated at about £100 per month – and symbolic financial remedies for the distress, frustration, and uncertainty caused by its failures. About 74 per cent of the payments this year related to issues with its Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service.

Previous cases have included a Surrey teenager who lost almost a year of school due to council staff shortages, and there have been parent-led protests outside the council's headquarters calling for better provision for children. The county council has previously stated that part of its long-running special educational needs problems had been the backlog of cases, made worse due to lack of staff, as well as the national shortage of trained educational psychologists.

The county council said it will focus on quicker, more empathetic complaint handling, issue new guidance and investigation templates to staff and carry out a 'deep-dive' review of issues impacting SEND.

Councillor Jonathan Hulley, cabinet member for children, families and lifelong learning, said: "We continue to work hard to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be. However, the Government has recognised that SEND is a broken national system in urgent need of funding and reform. Since 2018, Surrey's SEND service has made significant improvement against a hugely challenging national picture and an unprecedented increase in demand.

"Our longstanding dedication to and extensive investment in this issue has resulted in considerable progress, with the volume of complaints about education services down 12.1 per cent from the previous year. We also recognise that delays in issuing EHCPs have historically contributed to missed provision and subsequent fines, however considerable progress has been made in this area.

"Our average EHCP timeliness in Surrey across the 2025 calendar year to date is 91 per cent, well above the national average of 46.4 per cent. We have invested heavily in SEND and in July our Cabinet approved a further £4.9m to expand and restructure the service, including an increase to the team directly supporting families through the needs assessment and EHCP process from 81 to 141.

"This will reduce the number of families each staff member is supporting, and in turn create capacity for staff to work more closely and more responsively with children and young people, families, schools and settings. Over time we expect these improvements to have an impact on the number of Local Government Ombudsman complaints. It is our absolute priority to ensure every child with additional needs and disabilities in Surrey receives the support that they need."

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