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Surrey's school transport £12M overspend

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Surrey County Council officers say the authority must tackle a £12million overspend on school transport "to avoid adversely impacting services".

The situation is made all the more difficult as "pressures anticipated for 2023/24 are significantly higher than in recent financial years".

Surrey County Council has a duty to ensure 160,000 school children can get to school each day.
Of those, about 9,600 qualify for home to school travel assistance.

In 2021/22, 4,185 children used the travel scheme, up from 3,452 the year before. Between 2017 and 2020 the figure never topped 3,000.

The experience of families applying for travel assistance in the lead up to the 2022/23 academic year were so bad, and the service so overrun, the council set up a review that came back with 50 recommendations.

One parent interviewed as part of the process said "I felt incredibly sorry for them because they must have had every parent in Surrey with children screaming at them".

The review found that during the peak of 2022, travel assistance teams became "stretched and overwhelmed", with key staff absent for "reasons including stress".

The £12m overspend is particularly bad news for parents, many of whom were forced to wait months after the academic year began to get travel provision organised by the council, as the gap between funding and demand is only set to grow, council papers showed.

According to scrutiny papers, the "overall outlook for 2023/24 is one of significant challenge, with budget envelopes remaining relatively static in the face of substantial increases in the cost of maintaining current service provision and increased demand. Despite a small increase in the projected levels of funding, pressures anticipated for 2023/24 are significantly higher than in recent financial years."

The main driver behind the massive budget overspend, officers said, was "significant inflation, policy changes and the need to maintain the delivery of priority services experiencing significant demand pressures". Closing the gap, they said, would "require further actions" that would be "extremely challenging, given the level of pressure forecast, and may require the council to adopt measures that postpone the achievement of [its] ambitions".

An update on the council's finances, discussed on Tuesday, May 30, showed that biggest cause for the the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning directorate's £17.8m total overspend was the result of "rapid increases in demand following the COVID pandemic" for the travel service, and the re-opening of schools "after the 22/23 budget setting process" which was "further compounded by high fuel costs and driver shortages."

Officers have said that "tackling this gap will require a fundamentally different approach, given the level of efficiencies required, to avoid adversely impacting services".

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