



The cost to Surrey of sending SEND children to school

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The day Karissa Fisher turned 16, her parents found the vital transport support they needed to get her to school ended overnight.

Karissa, who has severe mobility impairments, had long received SEND help from the council – including with transport assistance in her daily journeys to and from a specialist school. This involved a round trip that, depending on the route, could stretch up to 50 miles across rural Surrey from Effingham to Cranleigh.

But she has become one of many young people facing the so-called post-16 SEND “cliff-edge”, where substantial amounts of statutory support is removed from when they hit this age.

Councils only have a legal obligation to offer free school transport for SEND children until they have reached the age of 16 – after which they have passed their compulsory years at school. Assistance can include specialist help in journeying to school as well as financial help towards travel costs.

Karissa’s mother Cassie Fisher and stepfather Ian Fisher are now locked in a battle with Surrey County Council to regain vital support to get Karissa to and from her specialist school.

They are among the many parents facing fraught and lengthy struggles to get support for SEND children across Surrey amid a tricky financial picture for many councils – with demand for these services continuing to climb.

“Where her school is located is miles from where we live,” Cassie told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS). “There is no public transport where we live. Even if we wanted to take her to school by public transport, we would not be able to do that anyway.”

“Unfortunately with these specialist schools, they seem to put them in the middle of nowhere. They are miles away.”

She and Ian said the council had refused their case for further transport support on the ground it would be “safe and reasonable” for working parents to escort their children to school – even though medical advice says Karissa requires a strict two-adult safety protocol on the journey.

While they had received a petrol allowance for the past five years, since Karissa turned 16 this support has been completely stopped.

However, procedural issues have stemmed their attempt to mount legal challenges against the council to get Karissa the support she needs. Many families struggle to prove “financial hardship” to claim post-16 support, but Ian told the LDRS there were no forms offered for him to present such evidence.

Not all claims for SEND support are assessed on the basis of financial hardship, with wider circumstances around a family’s needs usually being taken into account. But critics of the system argue it often leads to claims being assessed in an inconsistent manner.

“Because Surrey County Council now asserts that all internal appeal options for this academic year are exhausted, we are left in a position where we must wait for the upcoming school year cycle, at which point we intend to formally apply directly for funded taxi support,” Ian explained.

From observing school drop offs, he estimated that as many as four in ten of Karissa’s classmates receive this support. “It is impossible to understand how the council can claim to apply their policy consistently when nearly half her class receives funded transport, while Karissa is turned away,” he added.

Ian and Cassie are far from the only SEND parents in Surrey to have faced these problems in recent years. A freedom of information request by the LDRS found that Surrey County Council received 95 complaints about SEND transport in the 2025/26 financial year alone.

The data also laid bare the scale of the challenge facing the council as demand for support continues to soar. In the 2019/20 financial year, 4,586 children were receiving SEND transport support – a number that has consistently risen each year to a total of 7,243 in 2025/26.

Across the same time period, the council’s expenditure on this service climbed from £35,463,148 in 2019/20 to £59,667,792 in 2025/26 – despite a small dip during the height of the Covid pandemic.

Surrey County Council’s children and families lead Councillor Helyn Clack (Conservative: Dorking Rural) insisted that the

council applies national guidelines and its own policy “consistently and fairly”, but could not comment on individual cases.

“Each application is thoroughly assessed on individual circumstances, and that means cases which may appear similar can sometimes result in different decisions,” she said.

But many parents’ worries have been echoed by Guildford’s MP Zöe Franklin, who told the LDRS: “The problem with Surrey’s approach to SEND transport is that it is incredibly inconsistent. I have supported several constituents whose circumstances met many of the criteria needed by Surrey’s policy, only for their applications to be refused.

“The arbitrary way that rules are applied leaves families confused and frustrated. Families deserve a fair, transparent and consistent process, not one that appears to depend on who is making the decision.”

Emma, who asked only to be referred to by her first name, faced a two-year wait before the council acknowledged her child, who is aged under 16, required specialist support.

Her child is now attending a placement 17 miles from her home – and as a result, she applied for local transport given the distance. “It would mean driving an additional 340 miles per week, we couldn’t manage that ongoingly,” she told the LDRS.

“I also stated clearly in our application that there was already a council-contracted taxi that transports two other children to the specialist school which passes by our house each day. So I was requesting access to an existing resource that would not incur much – if any – additional cost.”

Despite this, her application for home-to-school transport was rejected on the grounds the school is not a named placement in the child’s EHCP.

The mother disputed this reasoning, citing the Education Act 1996 – and pointing out that other children at the same school receive this same support.

“My message to the council is that it is not acceptable to withhold SEND services regardless of financial pressures – this is a vulnerable and legally protected category of society. The law has not changed, families should not be subjected to rationing of support.”

While Emma’s own application was refused on EHCP placement grounds rather than employment criteria, she highlighted that rules around parental accompaniment have been a major hurdle for other local families.

She added: “They basically say work is no excuse for not taking your child to school. Their argument is every parent has to juggle their responsibility to take their child to school and their work.

“But that isn’t necessarily the case. If you have a SEND child and travel is necessary because the local authority hasn’t commissioned an appropriate setting for them nearby, the responsibility for mitigating the resulting travel burden sits with the council, not the family.

“Furthermore, their decision should also take into account what is ‘reasonably practicable’ for a family.”

According to the Department for Education’s guidance, councils will generally expect parents to accompany children, although authorities “must consider cases where the parent says there are good reasons why they are unable to accompany their child, or make other suitable arrangements for their journey, and make a decision on the basis of the circumstances of each case.”

Emma added: “I was warned by other parents to expect that I would probably have to appeal my application at least once, maybe even twice before getting approval. It seems to happen so often that this is what families now expect.”

Councillor Clack added that while demand continues to grow for SEND services, and that the council wants to use public money “responsibly and effectively” while ensuring that all eligible families get the support they need.

She told the LDRS: “For young people over compulsory school age, the rules for travel support are different and there is no automatic entitlement to funded travel support.

“We understand that this can be a significant change for young people with SEND and their families, and we consider each application carefully, according to a range of factors including the young person’s needs, the journey and placement, the available travel options, family circumstances and any further supporting evidence.

“Similarly, where a placement is temporary or on trial, this is taken into consideration but not treated in isolation; the other factors are also taken into account.

“We appreciate that families may sometimes disagree with a decision, and we offer a two-stage appeal process where they can submit additional information or evidence for consideration.”

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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