



Department
for Education

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street SW1P
3BT

Surrey County Council Letter

24 March 2026

The information in this letter is under strict embargo until 22:30 on Tuesday 24 March 2026 meaning this information should not be shared publicly until after that time, please.

Dear Rachael Wardell,

Planned Special and Alternative Provision Free Schools Thank you for your response on 5 March to my letter sent to you on 11 December confirming the next steps for planned special and alternative provision (AP) schools and what this may mean for projects in your area.

As you are aware, the Department offered Surrey County Council the option to decide whether the pipeline free schools are still the best option to deliver the places that meet the needs of local children and young people, or whether to accept alternative funding that would enable the local authority to create the places planned for the schools more quickly. Thank you for confirming the local authority has made the following decisions for the planned schools:

- **Betchwood Vale Academy** - continue with the school
- **Frimley Oak Academy** – continue with the school

In line with your statutory responsibility for place planning, the Department was clear that we would accept local authorities' decisions to accept alternative funding for equivalent numbers of places or proceed with school projects. Considering this, I am writing to inform you that the Secretary of State has accepted your decision to continue with Betchwood Vale Academy and Frimley Oak Academy. We will work to reprofile projects as quickly as possible. This will mean new delivery timelines to reflect the updated position which may mean the schools are not delivered to the timescale previously communicated. Officials will be in touch with you to discuss the next steps.

You will have noted the commission from the Department for each local area partnership to develop and submit a Local SEND Reform Plan in June 2026. As part of this, you will want to clearly set out how your decision to continue with the free schools supports how you will sustain and further strengthen your system, tilting provision towards stronger inclusive practice and early intervention, and ensuring that the conditions underpinning effective long-term outcomes are in place.

Additionally, the Department informed Surrey County Council that planned special free schools that have not yet had a trust appointed will not continue, and we will instead provide funding on top of the local authority's high needs capital allocations to deliver an equivalent number of places in a different way, instead of a new school. As we have not received any representations from you, we can formally confirm that **Surrey tbc Special School** will be withdrawn from the free school programme.

The alternative funding allocation will be profiled over 2 years (2026-27 and 2027-28), and the first payment will be made in the summer of 2026 alongside your high needs provision capital allocation.

Please note the Department is also writing to the appointed trusts confirming your decisions.

I would also like to thank you for your continued engagement with the Department and for the commitment shown to supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Yours sincerely



Dame Kate Dethridge

Regional Director, South East

Please note that this letter will be copied to local MPs.