



Florence Eshalomi MP,
Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee
Helen Hayes MP
Chair of the Education Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

16th October 2025

Dear Chairs,

I am writing to raise urgent concerns about the governance, culture, and statutory compliance of local authorities in the delivery of statutory Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services, and to request your Committees' consideration of what now appears to be a systemic and national failure of public administration, exacerbated by ministerial silence.

A National crisis in lawful local governance

Since I first raised these matters of local authority conduct in Parliament earlier this year, over 650 families have submitted first-hand testimonies from all nine regions of England, spanning over 100 different local authorities, describing their experiences of trying to obtain special educational provision for children and young people in crisis.

Collectively, these accounts reveal a widespread pattern of unlawful, unethical and obstructive practices in the execution of statutory SEND responsibilities by Local Authorities- resulting in significant harm, systemic trauma, and a profound breach of public trust.

It appears that, in prioritising the preservation of resources, many local authorities have abandoned the Nolan Principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity and accountability. Instead of acting as public servants, some now appear to be treating parents and carers - and their vulnerable children- as adversaries; weaponising bureaucracy, unlawfully delaying or withholding provision, and consequently inflicting prolonged, avoidable harm on children already recognised by families, teachers and professionals alike to be in crisis.

Families are describing deeply harrowing experiences, including:

- The prolonged withholding or refusal of support, even where the Local Authority's statutory duty is both clear and urgent.
- Statutory decisions made without evidence, or in direct contradiction to medical and professional advice.
- Misrepresentation of facts by officers in legal correspondence and proceedings.
- Persistent failure to comply with Tribunal orders, sometimes repeatedly.
- Fear of reprisal or withdrawal of support when raising concerns.
- A pervasive culture of delay, denial and deflection, where over-industrialised bureaucratic local processes have been layered into the system, obstructing access and deterring challenge.
- A complete collapse in trust, with families describing their relationship with the local authority, who are legally bound to provide support, as adversarial, traumatic, or "like going to war."



Above all, families are describing what feels like a brutalised culture of hostility and attrition- where statutory processes are used not to support children, but to wear down those seeking help, until they give up. The emotional and financial cost of this on families, already demonstrably in crisis -is severe.

Case Study: Surrey

I have previously raised these issues in relation to my own constituency, Surrey, where these patterns appear particularly entrenched, and the scale of maladministration is already clearly evidenced. Surrey has had more SEND Tribunal appeals than any other local authority in England for three consecutive years. For the same period, education-related complaints have run at nearly ten times the national average - a fact knowingly omitted by officers from formal scrutiny reports.

Complaints are now being reclassified as 'enquiries', and there is evidence that the Council actively attempted to restrict the ability of MPs to make local representations on issues relating to SEND. The Leader of the Council has been found to have issued false information in correspondence to MPs. The Chief Executive stated to MPs that there is "no particular problem" with SEND, only that Surrey parents are "particularly articulate." His Deputy went further, warning the Council to "guard against hearing from loud voices with access to legal representation." These remarks- dismissive of law, accountability and lived-experience of their residents- are wholly incompatible with public service.

In February 2025, I, along with a group of Surrey MPs wrote to the Secretary of State for Education, setting out our detailed concerns about serious failures in the Council's conduct, including systemic maladministration, dishonesty in formal reporting, and the repeated non-compliance with the Council's legal obligations. In July 2025 the Chair of the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee on Surrey County Council (who is not from my party) wrote to the Secretary of State concurring with our February letter. This was followed by a verbal intervention by Al Pinkerton MP on the floor of the House, and by the hand-delivery of over 120 anonymised testimonies from Surrey families detailing unethical, dishonest and harmful conduct by Council officers.

To date, there has been no meaningful response on these matters — not to MPs, not to Parliament, and not to the families who placed their trust in the Department.

This continued silence is deeply troubling. I maintain that the case for immediate intervention in Surrey is now overwhelming, and necessary to prevent further harm.

Accountability Breakdown

But while the failures in Surrey are uniquely well evidenced and demand immediate scrutiny, it is now clear that they are not isolated.

The over 650 testimonies submitted since these concerns were first raised, point to a widespread breakdown in lawful, ethical, and accountable practice across local government in their delivery of statutory SEND services. But while systemic pressures are well acknowledged, they cannot justify or excuse what hundreds, perhaps thousands, of families are now experiencing as a form of institutional neglect or abuse.



Chris Coghlan MP
Member of Parliament for Dorking and Horley
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

This raises urgent concerns not only about local authority conduct, but about the breakdown of governance, the erosion of public service principles, and the apparent failure of central government to intervene to uphold basic accountability in Public Office where it is most critically required.

I understand that the Department for Education is preparing for a significant programme of reform. But the evidence now before us calls into question whether the foundational principles of lawful and ethical public administration are being upheld at all. In this context, it would be wholly inappropriate to extend further discretionary powers to local authorities, or to remove any of the existing legal protections for children and families, at a time when confidence in the integrity and functionality of the system has been so gravely undermined.

I would be pleased to share the full correspondence, evidence, and contact timelines with the Chairs, and would welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee in person.

Yours faithfully,

Chris Coghlan

Liberal Democrat MP for Dorking and Horley