



Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

18th December 2025

Re: Urgent concerns over unlawful conduct, maladministration, and breakdown of accountability at Surrey County Council in the management of their statutory SEND responsibilities.

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for your detailed response to the serious concerns raised by Members of Parliament, parents, the Select Committee Chair and Headteachers regarding Surrey County Council's conduct in the delivery of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services.

Your acknowledgement of the severity and depth of the difficulties faced by families is welcomed.

It is important that the Department has now acknowledged the devastating scale and impact of the challenges experienced by children and young people with SEND, especially as these issues have been publicly minimised by this Council for too long.

Ongoing Concerns and Impact

As a Member of Parliament, I remain deeply concerned about the appalling circumstances described by families, where some Local Authorities appear to be acting in dysfunctional and, at times, unlawful ways. Such behaviour has led to harmful outcomes for vulnerable children. The most recent testimonies I have reviewed, from families covered by 114 local authorities across England, contain 195 specific references to child suicide.

Notably, Surrey has been the subject of three separate inquests in which the Coroner identified failures within the Directorate as contributing factors to the avoidable deaths of vulnerable children. The Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review for Sara Sharif further highlights the extent of maladministration and misconduct within this same Directorate, under the same leadership, with many systemic issues from the review still reported by families to be prevalent across all Children's Services today.

It is also of significance that, due to the level of concern among elected Members of Surrey County Council, an urgent motion has now been passed to appoint an external, independent expert to review the culture, systems and processes of this Children's Services Directorate against the Review's findings. I, however, have concerns over the independence of the "independent" expert appointed. As a previous colleague of the current Executive Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, as well as the current Safeguarding Director, there is a potential conflict of interest. I believe that an ex-Director of Children's Services from elsewhere in the country, who does not personally know the current Surrey DCS, should be appointed.

Furthermore, as a Member of Parliament for this area, I remain concerned that local measures alone will not be sufficient, and that timely and decisive intervention by your Department remains necessary to ensure the safety of children in Surrey.

Restoring Trust and Ensuring Transparent Intervention



Although families will be reassured by your acknowledgement that intervention in Surrey is warranted, meaningful change will only be possible where trust is restored between families and the services intended to support them.

Given the extent of the breakdown in trust in Surrey, I respectfully suggest that the design and transparency of your intervention are critical.

On behalf of parents and carers, I request clarification and confirmation on the following points:

- Leadership of the Deep Dive

I would be grateful for confirmation of who has been appointed to lead the deep dive.

Given the Department for Education's advisory engagement in Surrey over several years, and the concerns expressed about the impacts of progress achieved to date, it is essential that the review is chaired by an independent individual with no previous involvement in Surrey's SEND improvement work.

- Terms of Reference

I would also welcome publication of the terms of reference you have set out for this 'deep dive'.

For confidence to be restored, the scope of this review must:

- Prioritise the actual impact of services on children and families as evidenced by their experiences, rather than focusing primarily on administrative processes.
- Assess whether existing statutory duties are being discharged lawfully, consistently, and without procedural irregularity.
- Examine the specific and serious concerns repeatedly raised by families and professionals.
- Ensure parents, teachers and front-line staff can provide evidence freely, safely and without undue influence.

- Transparency and Publication

For transparency, I would be grateful for confirmation that the deep dive's findings will be published in full, together with the Department's rationale for any further action.

Finally, while I welcome your intention to meet with Rachael Wardell, Surrey's Executive Director of Children's Services, I respectfully request that you also meet with the Chair of Surrey's Education Select Committee.

I would also like to take you up on the offer of a visit to speak to parents and families impacted by the broken SEND system in Surrey. I run regular hour long SEND coffee mornings which provide a safe space and an opportunity for parents and carers of children affected to speak about their experiences. I believe coming along to one of these sessions would provide invaluable insight into the failings of Surrey County Council, as well as expanding on the testimonies I shared with you back in July.



Chris Coghlan MP

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

If possible, I am keen for this to occur before the Government's white paper is published. Please suggest some dates and times suitable for a visit and I will organise this as soon as possible and provide full details.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Coghlan".

Chris Coghlan

Liberal Democrat MP for Dorking and Horley