



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



Education Committee

Tuesday, 28 October 2025

Dear Chris Coghlan MP,

Thank you for writing to raise your concerns about the governance, culture, and compliance of local authorities in the delivery of statutory Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision. The Education Select Committee is very familiar with these issues and shares many of the concerns you have outlined.

Throughout our inquiry, Solving the SEND Crisis, the Committee received extensive evidence from parents, young people, schools, local authorities, and experts across the sector. The evidence is clear that the SEND system is under significant strain and, in many areas, is failing to meet its statutory duties. The Committee concluded that the system is indeed in crisis, with deep-rooted problems, not only concerning governance, accountability and culture but also with SEND workforce pressures, capacity and finances. Combined, these issues have led to widespread inconsistency and inequity in the support available to children and young people with SEND and far too many families being let down.

The experiences reflected in your letter and the testimonies shared echo much of what the Committee heard during the inquiry. Parents and carers told us they often feel sidelined, blamed, or forced into costly and exhausting legal battles to secure their child's rights. At the same time, local authorities told us that they do not have the resources to meet their statutory obligations and that SEND deficits are pushing them to the edge of effective bankruptcy. We also observed significant variability in local authority performance so that even within the same very challenging financial circumstances some do better than others. Throughout the inquiry, the Committee also heard clear evidence that accountability within the SEND system is weak and fragmented due to structural misalignment between statutory responsibilities and the powers available to deliver them. Health and social care partners are too often absent from the SEND process, and there are currently no effective mechanisms to hold health services to account. In education, accountability is unevenly distributed, creating an over-reliance on the statutory elements of the system.

In response to these challenges, the Committee made 95 detailed recommendations, including:

- Dedicated resourcing and ongoing training of local authority staff to build skills, capacity and confidence to work effectively with families;
- Aligning local authorities' statutory responsibilities with their powers and resources to deliver sufficient school places;
- The systematic monitoring of SEND Tribunal outcomes by the Department of Education and the Department for Health and Social Care to identify local authorities that repeatedly fail to comply with their statutory duties;



Education Committee

- Introducing statutory duties for health and social care partners and extending SEND Tribunal powers to cover health provision;
- Building an inclusive mainstream education system with much more accountability for ordinarily available provision and SEN support, to reduce reliance on EHCPs as the only accountable part of the system;
- Delivering more specialist school places in the state sector to meet need and reduce both the cost of home to school transport and the cost of expensive specialist independent school places

Thank you again for raising these important concerns. The Committee remains committed to monitoring the Government's response to our recommendations and to ensuring that the reforms promised deliver meaningful improvements for children, young people, and families.

Helen Hayes MP
Chair, Education Committee