

Marie Goldman

Deputy leader of
Chelmsford City
Council and
Liberal Democrat
Parliamentary
candidate for
Chelmsford

POINTS OF VIEW

The SEND system is utterly broken with heartbreaking consequences

LIKE to use this column to tell positive, cheerful and uplifting stories about things that are happening in our community and around our city. Regular readers may remember the many charities that I have shone a light on and the vital work that they do, some looking after the most vulnerable in our society and others creating safe spaces to encourage new talent and creativity.

Sometimes, however, I feel compelled to tell you about an issue that doesn't have that feelgood, optimistic slant, but which is so important that I have to write about it anyway.

This is one of those weeks. This week I want to highlight something which has recently been taking up a lot of my time – and that's the crisis in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

I want you to know about the impact that chronic and systemic underfunding is having on children and their families right here in Chelmsford as well as across the entire country. But there's a reason it's even worse in Essex than elsewhere. I'll get to that soon, but first, for those of you who may not have any experience of this subject, I need to explain what's going on.

There are thousands of children and young people with SEND living in Essex. The chances are, you probably know someone or have a family member who this affects. SEND has an impact on a child or young person's ability to learn. It can include a very wide range of issues, including autistic spectrum conditions, speech, language and communication issues, physical disabilities and developmental delay. You can read more on this on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information and Advisory Service (SENDIAS) website at www.essexsendiass.co.uk/parents-and-carers/the-definition-of-sen-and-disabilities/the-definition-of-sen-and-disabilities.

When it is suspected that a child or young person may have a special educational need or disability, the local authority can be asked to carry out an assessment to decide whether an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) will be issued to provide addi-



Councillor Marie Goldman at Essex County Council's People & Families Scrutiny Committee meeting in County Hall, Chelmsford, asking the question that elicited the shocking revelation of just one per cent of Education Health and Care Plans being issued within the legal timeframe

CLLR MARIE GOLDMAN

tional support for the child or young person. The local authority (LA) that is responsible for this is the LA that has responsibility for education. Here in Chelmsford, that is Essex County Council.

By law, the LA has 16 weeks, from the date the request to assess a child or young person was submitted, to decide whether an EHCP will be issued. If the LA agrees an assessment is needed, it has a total of 20 weeks, from the date of the request for assessment, to issue the EHCP.

If you're a parent of a child with SEND, 20 weeks can seem like a very

long time. For many parents, it's an anxious and desperate wait, hoping that the EHCP will finally give them the support that their child sorely needs to help them learn and, in lots of cases, even to attend school at all. Unfortunately, it has been known for a

long time that Essex County Council is not often meeting the 20-week deadline.

That isn't really much of a surprise – across the country, only about 50 per cent of EHCPs are issued within 20 weeks. What we didn't know until just a few weeks ago was that Essex County Council is only meeting the 20-week deadline in one per cent of cases.

That's shocking. It makes Essex bottom in the country.

It was finally made public in answer to a question that I raised at a scrutiny committee meeting. You can watch the moment that damning figure was announced on YouTube here: youtu.be/NDCrShXIoGs

The SEND system in this country is utterly broken and it's having heartbreaking and devastating consequences for children and their families, including in our own community here in Chelmsford.

I've been in tears reading the traumatic battles that parents are having to go through just to get what their children need, deserve and are entitled to. Many of them are having to

spend thousands upon thousands of pounds taking Essex County Council to tribunal to get what they need.

This can take years. But in some ways, these parents are the lucky ones because the statistics show that across the country, parents win 98 per cent of SEND tribunal cases.

Yet many parents can't afford this option, so they are often left without the support they need for their children to get an education that will allow them to lead their best possible life. It's disgraceful and it must change.

I would like to say a huge thank you to the many parents and education professionals who have contacted me over the past couple of months, bravely sharing their experiences with me as I have been looking into this crucial issue.

One parent wrote to me saying there is "no joint working with parents whatsoever. You simply can't get hold of anyone to respond to questions, queries. There is no one working with you to get the support your child needs, everything about the system is against parents and

you have to battle for even the slightest thing."

That isn't good enough. At the very least, councils shouldn't leave people in the dark, and combat should never be the default position.

While the sheer scale of this crisis means that I won't be able to help in every individual case, I am pleased to say that I am hopeful for at least some positive change at Essex County Council, which has agreed to my request to set up a Task & Finish Group to look specifically at this topic with a view to improving the experience for all involved.

While it will only truly be fixed by a large injection of money from central government to provide the necessary resources, I believe a big difference can be made locally by doing things as simple as improving communication and transparency.

I'll keep working on this and trying to work constructively with Essex County Council to push for change.

If you want to get in touch with me about this issue, please send an email to: office@mariegoldman.uk

Marie

“
Essex County Council is only meeting the 20-week deadline in one per cent of cases.

CLLR Marie Goldman