

Some Perspectives on Home Education

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Introduction

This report relays the findings from a small-scale exploratory study of the local authority's role regarding elective home education (EHE) in 16 local authorities. Whilst the sample was not necessarily representative at a national level, it did cover different types of authority (for example, county, metropolitan, unitary city, unitary regional and London boroughs). The semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with 21 local authority officers (including those with a lead responsibility for monitoring EHE) and practitioners who were responsible for conducting the monitoring visits. In addition, the local authority officers were also asked to nominate parents who might be willing to speak to researchers, particularly those who had decided to educate their children at home as a result of negative experiences within school. In total, four parents were interviewed to gain their perspectives on EHE and their relationships with the local authority. Relevant documentation produced by local authorities was also collected.

Roles and responsibilities

Within the sample, staff responsible for EHE were located in a range of local authority departments, reflecting the difficulty for local authorities in deciding where responsibility for EHE should lie. Is it welfare, school improvement, Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) (as recommended by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)) or quality assurance? Where the responsibility for EHE lies within the local authority will impart a message to parents about the local authority's view on EHE. Indeed, concerns were raised about how the title of the local authority personnel with responsibility for EHE may be perceived by parents, for example, whether it was perceived as a welfare or curriculum support role.

Most of the local authority interviewee sample was from an advisory/school improvement or education welfare background.

In some local authorities, responsibility for EHE had moved location in recent years or, by default, had become the responsibility of a particular strategic manager. These changes were often precipitated by concerns that EHE was not being monitored effectively. In other local authorities, the responsibility had been added to existing roles.

Roles and responsibilities: parents' experiences

The inclusion of home education within the remit of local authority officers who had a responsibility for vulnerable children was contested. According to one parent 'The irony of it is that [child's name] would be incredibly vulnerable if he was in the [school] system, but out of the system, he is not.' S/he felt that those parents who choose to home educate already received less respect than other parents, without the added suggestion that their children are considered 'vulnerable'.

The number of EHE children

The numbers of EHE children known to local authorities in the sample and the proportion of the school population that this represented varied widely between authorities, although, overall, it was extremely small. It ranged from nine to 189 children per authority and from 0.02 per cent to 0.34 per cent of the school population. However, all interviewees felt that there may be significant numbers of EHE families they were not aware of (interviewees and others estimated that local authorities knew of about a third to a half of the young people on EHE).

Transition from primary to secondary school appeared to be a key point at which the numbers of EHE children known to the local authorities in the sample increased.

The local authorities were monitoring the reasons parents elected to home educate to varying degrees. For example, some local authorities collated data on the reasons given, whilst in others the reasons were not monitored collectively.

The reasons for home education

There was an acknowledgement that the reasons for EHE can change over time, that there is often more than one reason and that there may be some interconnection between the reasons given.

According to their own classification systems, the most common reasons given for home education by the local authorities within the sample were:

- lifestyle, cultural or philosophical factors;
- dissatisfaction with the school environment;
- withdrawal for reasons of non-attendance;
- bullying.

Other reasons cited as on the increase were the risk of exclusion or prosecution, and special educational needs (SEN). In one local authority, the

number of parents citing SEN as a reason for EHE had increased by 50 per cent over the last five to six years.

In a number of local authorities, the establishment of schools for certain religious denominations had led to a dramatic reduction in the numbers of children home educated for religious reasons.

The reasons for home education: parents' experiences

Amongst the four parents interviewed, a number of different rationales for home education were evident. Two parents cited special educational needs (for example, dyspraxia and autism) as their main rationale. Other parents talked about disillusionment with the school system (for example, teachers' inability to focus on individual children) and a belief that children should remain with their parents for longer, that is, that their children were too young and too anxious to start school. In the latter case, the school had been unwilling to offer a flexible placement, for example, part-time attendance, in the first instance. Different reasons were proffered for different children within the same family. In all cases, there was a strong belief that the school system could not fulfill their children's needs and it was clear that a decision to home educate had not been taken lightly.

Monitoring systems

Most local authorities within the sample were using databases to monitor young people on EHE, but the length of time they had been monitoring these children varied considerably (from nine years to under a year). The introduction of more robust systems had often coincided with service reorganisation, when responsibility for EHE had been brought under the remit of a specific service or officer.

In some local authorities, data on EHE children was included as part of a wider electronic management system for all young people in the authority. This was seen as key in terms of integrated children's services, particularly as local authorities will be asked about their monitoring processes in their Joint Area Reviews. In others, monitoring systems were part of a particular service database, for example, the Education Welfare Service (EWS) or EOTAS, reflecting the location of the responsibility for the monitoring.

There was evidence that regional groups (that is, cross local authority groups) were bringing together data on young people on EHE and using that data to identify patterns and areas of similarity and difference.

Notification of the intention to home educate

Local authority officers responsible for home education were notified of parents' intention to home educate by parents themselves, by schools or by the EWS. Following notification, parents were usually sent a form to complete and/or a pack providing initial information. Interviewees noted the benefits of involving home education organisations, such as Education Otherwise, in checking their local authority's documentation sent out to parents, such as booklets or forms to be completed.

At the point of notification, some local authorities also placed EHE children on their 'off roll' register, thereby linking EHE children with children missing education.

In some instances, parents contacted the local authority to discuss home education prior to making the final decision. A few local authorities, where there were specific concerns, tried to visit families prior to their children's removal from the school roll (although legally schools have to remove pupils from their roll when notified by parents to do so). In contrast, personnel in other local authorities appeared to be more removed from the pre-notification process.

Notification of the intention to home educate: parents' experiences:

All four parents had experienced some degree of conflict with the school system when notifying schools of the decision to home educate. This ranged from issues to do with lack of communication to a negative attitude towards the notion of home education. They stated that they had to complete a form or questionnaire for the local authority once they had de-registered their children from school and that this was then followed by a home visit. One parent commented that s/he thought that filling in the forms would be more difficult than it proved and that the notes and guidance provided had been helpful. Another stated that s/he had found it difficult to explain, in the limited space provided, his/her reasons for home educating and what s/he hoped to achieve. This parent had explained that an exact timetable could not be provided because s/he wanted to take a flexible approach to her child's education. None of the parents interviewed stated that they had contacted their local authority prior to making a decision to home educate, although one parent pre-empted contact once they had taken the decision by writing to the local authority with a copy of the de-registration letter.

Home visits and relationships with parents

In the majority of local authorities in the sample, annual home visits were conducted for the purpose of monitoring home education provision, although six-monthly and termly visits were also noted. The majority of local authority interviewees stated that they would visit more often if they had concerns about the education provided, with the frequency depending on the level of concern.

Most frequently, local authority officers with a teaching background were responsible for conducting home visits, although, in some instances, these ‘teaching professionals’ and education welfare staff carried out joint visits. In contrast, in two local authorities, staff with an education welfare background were responsible for conducting the home visits, although they had access to advisory teachers and SEN specialists to support learning.

The level of information requested from parents varied between local authorities. Whereas some local authority officers asked parents for a broad overview, others were more curriculum-focused and requested more detailed information, for example, on subject areas and methods of monitoring and recording progress.

Local authority personnel emphasised the importance of taking a non-judgemental approach and developing positive relationships with EHE families. However, all interviewees noted that, at some point, they had been refused entry to parents’ homes. Whilst acknowledging parents’ right to refuse entry and suggesting alternative locations, staff expressed concern about their ability to fulfil what they felt were their responsibilities to children in danger of missing education under the Every Child Matters (ECM) and safeguarding children agendas, if they failed to meet with the children themselves.

Local authority interviewees highlighted the difficulties in determining what an ‘efficient and suitable’ education is for EHE children and ensuring that officers are consistent in their definition, within and across local authorities.

Home visits and relationships with parents: parents' experiences:

In all instances, the local authority conducted ongoing visits on an annual basis, although in the first instance, they may have been six-monthly. The parents in the sample had developed a good relationship with the local authority contact and had found the local authority support helpful. They were happy to contact the local authority for support if they needed it. Some of the parents interviewed noted the benefits of local authority officers having a teaching background. A keen interest in, and a connection with the children was considered key to the development of an effective relationship. In most cases, parents indicated that a short written report and an annual visit was all that was required by local authorities in terms of monitoring the provision that parents provided. However, one parent recalled being asked for a year's worth of lesson plans and predicted outcomes for every subject, something s/he had been told was not expected from teachers in school. S/he stated that, on a yearly basis, s/he received a letter from the local authority asking for schemes of work, a curriculum timetable, the amount of work covered over a set period and the levels of attainment expected.

Intervention and support

Where local authority officers felt that the education provided by parents was unsatisfactory, areas of weakness were highlighted and interviewees stated that parents were given time to improve the provision.

Where there was no improvement, local authority officers would suggest a return to school or consider a school attendance order, which would be dealt with by referral to the EWS. Used by four of the 16 local authorities within the sample, school attendance orders were seen as a 'last resort'.

The majority of local authorities in the sample provided advice and support to EHE parents via websites and booklets/guidance. Information provided focused on frequently asked questions, lists of resources and useful links.

The main areas of local authority support for young people who were home educated centred on college placements, work experience, and post-16 opportunities (such as linking with Connexions). A small number of interviewees highlighted that they had funded college places for EHE children. However, for the majority, accessing funding was a major issue. Interviewees in a small number of local authorities also said that they would identify and vet work experience placements for EHE young people.

Interviewees noted that they informed families about accessing resources through local libraries and City Learning Centres. In addition, some local

authorities informed parents of local support groups and national EHE organisations.

Intervention and support: parents' experiences

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that parents were selected by the local authorities, there were no examples of instances where the education provided by parents was considered inadequate within the sample. Parents stated that previous experience of helping out at their child's school or having previous children who had attended school was an asset in helping them to establish a suitable curriculum. Establishing a curriculum for younger children was thought to be easy in the first instance since it was considered to be 'a natural extension of play'. One parent had received a considerable amount of local authority support to assist with devising an appropriate curriculum, whilst another had focused on his/her child's interests and adapted this to address national curriculum issues.

The four parents interviewed had received a wide range of different types of support from their local authority, including websites, resources, links with services (for example, the Educational Psychology Service), and advice on strategies (for example, reward systems, practice National Curriculum tests). However, the fact that the local authority contact was friendly, listened and offered encouragement, was also considered important. Amongst the experiences of the four parents interviewed, there were examples of local authority staff facilitating contact with Connexions, GCSE examination boards, access to work placements, and links with colleges (although it was also noted that the cost of attending college courses and taking examinations before the age of 16 years remains the responsibility of the home educator).

One parent, with a child with autism, had nothing but praise for the support s/he had received from the SEN department within the local authority. S/he also felt that having a local authority contact who was a maths advisor had been helpful. In contrast, one parent stated that, once established as a home educator, s/he saw the local authority role very much as a monitoring one because of the limit to what they could provide. In one instance, where the parent interviewed was the convenor of a local home education group, the local authority contact made a point of passing on her contact details to others within the authority who had elected to home educate and to those who were considering it.

Information sharing

A quarter of interviewees suggested that information sharing amongst agencies in relation to EHE children in their authority was effective or recently much improved. However, almost half indicated that, in their authority, it was ineffective, lacked formality or was *'ad hoc'*. There was a view that, with the move towards integrated children's services, information sharing would improve.

Some lack of awareness about EHE amongst other agencies and services, including policy advisors and legal services, was highlighted. Problems with publicising EHE generally were also cited. Achieving a balance between notifying parents of their right to EHE and a local authority view that it would be preferable for children to attend school was considered a delicate issue.

Schools and the EWS were the education services most frequently involved in notifying the local authority of EHE children, but, instances were cited of schools not always informing the authority of the de-registration of a pupil.

Another common pathway for notifying the local authority of EHE children was via health services, where referrals were reported to come mainly from health visitors.

Contact with home education organisations

Almost half of the authority personnel reported having some form of ongoing contact with local EHE organisations, although their experiences of this relationship were very mixed. Some said they had encountered antagonism from EHE organisations but had tried to break down the barriers because they did not think that having a 'them and us' situation was good for parents and children. In contrast, there were examples where relationships were more positive and had proved effective, for example, where an Education Otherwise representative and a local authority advisor had worked on mutual promotion and these links had been used to negotiate with a family to good effect.

Just under half of the local authority personnel interviewed stated that they belonged to a regional EHE networking group. These networks were reported to provide an invaluable opportunity to develop consistency and good practice across local authorities, as well as share concerns in an otherwise isolating job.

Contact with home education organisations: parents' experiences

The parents interviewed stated that the home education organisations, such as Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service, provided a great deal of information and advice, as well as access to share the experiences of other parents. One parent reported that s/he would have found it difficult to home educate, that is, 'go against the norm', without the emotional support of his/her local group. In contrast, however, another parent stated that s/he found that the motivations for EHE amongst parents within the home education organisations tended to be very different from his/her own. It was also noted that, where children's difficulties were more individual (for example, SEN) attending a local group had been less helpful.

Challenges for local authorities

The local authority personnel interviewed highlighted the delicate balance and tension that existed between what was viewed as local authority responsibility and parents' rights. They called for some clarity in this respect.

Half of all the local authority interviewees thought that EHE parents' right to refuse a local authority visit was a significant obstacle and they questioned their ability to assess the suitability of education under these circumstances.

The inaccessibility of some EHE children also raised concerns about welfare issues and the local authority responsibility to safeguard children. According to interviewees, problems arose where there were concerns about a family's circumstances or children's isolation and, given the lack of sufficient evidence, they felt powerless to act or to refer cases on to other agencies.

One of the main challenges identified by local authority interviewees was fulfilling the local authority's responsibility to act if they believe children are not receiving a suitable education. Half of all the local authority personnel interviewed cited the lack of a definition of an 'efficient and suitable' education as an obstacle. Although defined in case law, further clarification regarding what this entailed in practice was called for. In addition, interviewees felt that having no requirement to provide education of a certain standard could lead to some variation in the quality of education provided.

A quarter of local authority interviewees cited as an issue the fact that there was no legal responsibility for parents to notify the local authority they were home educating if children had not attended school.

Local authority interviewees felt that there was an inherent conflict between legislation relating to EHE and ECM guidance. They felt that current legislation relevant to EHE appeared to focus on the wishes and rights of parents rather more than the welfare of the child.

A few local authority personnel, when questioned on barriers and challenges, drew attention to the lack of support and resources for EHE parents.

Challenges for local authorities: parents' experiences

One parent stated that s/he was aware that other EHE parents had refused the local authority access to their home. In his/her view, this approach would not show his/her children the best way of handling authority. The local authority's responsibility for monitoring home education was recognised, with another parent stating that his/her advice to other parents would be to let the local authority in because s/he had found it a positive experience and more of a help than a hindrance. Although a lack of support for EHE parents was noted by local authority interviewees, the interviews with the four parents in the sample suggested that sufficient support was available and that they accessed this through a variety of means: the local authority, local and national home education organisations, and through relationships with other EHE parents. However, when asked about other support that might be helpful, they highlighted the following: more flexible approaches to schooling, advice on alternative curricula, a weekly school club, and a change in society's attitude to qualifications. In addition, one of the main difficulties identified was that it was difficult to know your child's attainment level since EHE parents often had no one to compare with.

The benefits and challenges for home educators

The four parents interviewed for this small-scale study were also asked about the benefits and challenges of home educating for them and their children.

The two parents of children with special needs stressed the benefits in terms of their child's learning. They noted, for example, that their child was able to concentrate better and that their understanding had improved. This had led to increased confidence and more effective learning. In addition, the availability of a computer and lack of time constraints for completion of work at home had reportedly benefited one child with dyspraxia. Another parent suggested that children educated at home were able to learn in a greater variety of, and more interesting, ways than children in school.

One of the main advantages, noted by the parents of those children who had been in mainstream school previously, was that the stress associated with school issues, such as school expectations and homework, was eliminated. As a result, children were reported to be happier and, in one instance, their mental health much improved. Other benefits reported by more than one parent were the development of a close relationship between parent and child, and

improved socialisation, some noting that their children had more friends since they had been home educated than when they had attended mainstream school.

The reassurance that their children were happy and the close relationship between them and their children were also reported to be important benefits for parents. In addition, one parent stated that making friends with other home-educating families had been an advantage, particularly as these were people s/he otherwise would not have met.

However, home education was also said to be challenging for parents and therefore not something to be considered lightly. Only one parent talked about the challenges in terms of curriculum delivery. This was a parent of a child with special needs who was keen to deliver a 'national curriculum' focused curriculum. This parent stated that it was difficult to know what you should be teaching your child and what stage or standard they should be at. S/he added that local authority support had helped with this.

The commitment involved in implementing home education was emphasised when parents talked about the inability to work (and associated loss of income) and having no time to themselves, in addition to the pressures associated with going against the norm and a lack of understanding from others. In one instance, for example, a parent reported being accused by other parents of depriving their children of education.

Policy recommendations for local authorities

When asked about recommendations for policy changes, local authority interviewees' main proposals centred around three key areas: resources and support for EHE families, legal concerns surrounding EHE, and the monitoring and assessment of EHE provision.

Just under three-quarters of the local authority officers in the sample called for additional support for EHE families. Their recommendations were grouped into three main areas: additional funding for EHE provision, support for EHE parents, and pre-16 alternative educational opportunities for EHE children.

Local authority personnel's legal concerns led them to propose the following: that all parents' register their intent to home educate with the local authority, that the term 'efficient and suitable' full-time education be more accurately defined, and, because of the local authority's responsibility with regard to safeguarding children, a requirement for EHE children to be seen by professionals (although local authorities are responsible for safeguarding and promoting children's welfare, they do not have powers to enter homes).

Other recommendations fell under the remit of monitoring and assessment and they included the importance of monitoring the educational provision made for EHE children and the need for regular assessments to determine EHE children's educational progress.

There were suggestions regarding support of a more preventative nature: schools adopting more flexible approaches to education, such as the provision of an increased range of vocational education and accepting more part-time placements.

Policy recommendations for local authorities: parent's views:

When asked about recommendations for the local authority, the parents interviewed suggested the following: guidelines for what is supposed to be taught at different stages, financial support (since they regarded themselves as saving the local authority money), and advice and encouragement (that is, without dictating). There was a call for there to be a greater acceptance that parents are entitled to home educate their children and therefore that local authorities should try to work with them and not against them.

Follow-up research

Following this initial small-scale exploratory study, largely focusing on local authority perspectives on home education, in order to garner different viewpoints on the issues raised, further research in this area will be undertaken to include the perspectives of a larger number of representatives from the home educating community, as well as the perspectives of national and local home education organisations which provide support for EHE families.