

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Home Education, HC 839

Tuesday 24 November 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1-58

Witnesses

[1]: Jenny Coles, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS); Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Deputy Chair, Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association; Mrunal Sisodia, Co-chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF); and Jane Lowe, Trustee, Home Education Advisory Service.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jenny Coles, Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Mrunal Sisodia and Jane Lowe.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for coming today. For the benefit of the tape and for those members of the public watching on Parliament TV, could I ask you in turn to give your name and also very briefly what your organisation does and who it represents?

Jenny Coles: Jenny Coles. I am President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, representing local authorities and Directors of Children's Services.

Councillor Nethsingha: I am Lucy Nethsingha. I am a councillor in Cambridgeshire and I am here representing the Local Government Association as the deputy chair of the Children and Young People Board.

Jane Lowe: I am Jane Lowe and I am one of the trustees of Home Education Advisory Service, a national charity that has existed since the last century to support and advise home educators.

Mrunal Sisodia: I am Mrunal Sisodia. I am one of the co-chairs of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums, which represents families of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. We operate across England and have approximately 100,000 members.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. I have a problem from birth for some reason about "R" so if I do not say your name properly, please excuse me. Thank you everybody, and welcome again.

As of March 2019, local authorities reported to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator that 60,000-plus students were being electively home-educated in England. Do these figures resonate with your findings and what estimate have you made of the number of home-educated children known to the local authority because their former school has notified the local authority, and the number of those children that might have slipped under the radar?

Jane Lowe: I think the question about home educators who are known to the local authority is a good one, because any child who has been withdrawn from school will automatically be known to the local authority. The regulations say that schools must notify the local authority once the child is withdrawn from school, so the children will be known about. They will be known about by the school and they will be known about by the local authority.

Councillor Nethsingha: To answer your initial question, I am going to jump in front of Jenny and say that the ADCS annual survey that was published yesterday puts that figure now at 75,668 children. That is a survey so it may not be a hugely accurate figure, but it is probably the most accurate figure we have. I put my hand up to respond to Jane's



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point about local authorities knowing where all children are. I am afraid, sadly, that is not the case, for two very good reasons. One is that while that is true if children leave full-time education, if children never enter school education there will not be a record of their having left it, and therefore local authorities will not be aware of where those children are.

It is also the case that if children move from one local authority to another there is no obligation on parents at that point to register them with the local authority, so there are a number of uncertainties, and some children become invisible in the system, which is one of the key points we are concerned about.

Jane Lowe: To add to that, I was talking specifically about children coming out of school.

Chair: Understood, thank you. Mrunal?

Mrunal Sisodia: I suppose for us my opening statement would be we would very much dispute the word “elective” in that. There are a lot of children that are home-educated but they are not electively home-educated. It is not a positive choice by the parents; they have been forced into that situation. I am sure we will get the opportunity to explore that theme a little bit further.

Chair: I think that is a very important point and we will come on to children’s special educational needs. You know that our Committee cares about that deeply and has done a lot of work on it. Jenny?

Jenny Coles: To build on what Jane and Lucy have said, ADCS published yesterday. We did the survey and 133 local authorities responded. It is estimated that now 75,668 children are potentially home-educated. When we did the survey last year—there is no formal survey of the numbers of elective home-educated children; ADCS is the survey that is done—there was an estimated total number of 66,648 home-educated children in the October census in 2019, which does show there has been an increase. Obviously, that is an estimated number.

To pick up Lucy and Jane’s point, the numbers that are known to the local authority from schools, that is the duty, but if children have never been educated in the education system, or moved, it may well not pick up those numbers.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Perhaps I should have said this at the beginning. Unanimously the Committee supports home education, we want to support parents who home-educate their children, but we also want to ensure the best life chances for all children who are home-educated.

Could you answer very concisely, because we have a lot to get through?

Should there be much more accurate data collection as to the number of children being home-educated, and should the Department for Education collate the figures—or the local councils—and be much more rigorous, so that we can find out what specifically is going on and not rely solely or



predominantly on surveys?

Jenny Coles: Yes, absolutely; I would certainly agree with that. The reason is that those numbers are going up every year, so clearly this is a substantial number of children, and therefore if local authorities and other organisations are going to support these children and have good-quality options or offers for education then we need to know those numbers.

Jane Lowe: We must not lose sight of the fact that parents are the ones who have the duty to educate the child. That has always been in the law, and the local authority's duty is secondary to support the education of all children. We have always believed that it is very important for parents to retain that duty, so that they have the option, so home education is a choice of equal worth with school education, maintained education and independent education. It is a choice that parents make. It is the parents' duty and there is a danger that the parents' duty will be overlooked in this. The parents' primary responsibility must be maintained.

Mrunal Sisodia: To answer your question succinctly, yes. Better records of the numbers would be very helpful indeed. Within that, it is really important for us to understand why this is happening—really drive out what the underlying reasons are. Again I absolutely support Jane, in that, as a representative of a parental group, the education of my children is primarily my responsibility. That is not to dilute that in any way, shape or form, but sometimes making sure that parents get the right support and the right choices when making that decision is really important.

Jenny Coles: Yes, absolutely; I would certainly agree with that. If we do not have reasonably accurate numbers, and I say "we" in a broader sense, not just the local authority, doing that job of supporting parents, making sure that what is on offer—there is a range of things that I am sure we will go into, which could improve what is on offer to parents—is really difficult if you do not know the cohort and the numbers that are in the local area.

Councillor Nethsingha: I absolutely agree with Jenny that there is a need for much better data. We also need to remember that while it is a very tiny minority of children being home-educated who might be at risk, the vast majority of children are safe and well cared-for by their parents. There is this tiny minority who may be at risk and it is very important that we understand where they are, and that there are some checks on their safety.

Q4 **Chair:** What more could we do to support home-educating parents? Would you all answer in a very concise way?

Councillor Nethsingha: Again this is where more data would be helpful. As Mrunal has said, it is very important to understand why parents are choosing to educate their children at home. For parents who are making a very positive choice that that is what they want to do, it is very helpful



to have support there, but there is a significant minority of parents who are choosing home education because they feel they have been failed by the school system. We need to make sure that those parents get much better support than there is now. Resources are a key issue for councils. For that group of parents.

Jane Lowe: I would like to say straightaway, having been involved in home education for so many years now, that it has always been the case that many families come into home education because they have had problems in school and are at their wits' end—they are desperate. We have talked to thousands of these parents over the years. If they start off like that, it is very important that we understand that that is not necessarily a negative thing. Some parents have gone into home education in the most desperate circumstances, but if you speak to the same parents five or 10 years on they will say, "We wish we had done it years ago. We really wish we hadn't waited so long." So please don't assume that if a parent starts off with a negative reason for home education it will fail, because it won't.

Q5 **Chair:** May I ask about safeguarding? While recognising that for most parents there are no issues whatsoever in terms of safeguarding, the Safeguarding Alliance and other organisations have highlighted some cases. For example, Jordan Burling starved to death in 2016; although he was just an adult he had been home-schooled from the age of 12. He had become invisible to so many support services and had received a home education visitor at the age of 15. Dylan Seabridge died of scurvy in Wales in 2011; he had not been seen by the authorities for seven years. The ADCS 2019 survey found that nearly one-third of the known home-educated cohort had some contact—which of course can mean many different things—with Children's Services.

The Safeguarding Alliance strongly support home education but they have expressed safeguarding concerns for some home-educated pupils even if it is a significant minority, saying that it is important that children do not fall off the statutory radar and that they remain visible to all agencies. They argue there should be an assessment framework implemented—a certain rationale and reasoning behind the decision to choose elective home education. What do you think needs to happen to ensure that in those rare cases in terms of home education—I stress, rare—those safeguarding issues are solved? Why are current measures not always working? Do you need more robust training for local authority officers? Do you need to do what the Children's Commissioner suggested—termly visits by council staff to each home-educated child, to assess the sustainability of their education and welfare?

Jane Lowe: Of the two cases that you mentioned, Dylan Seabridge sticks in my mind because that case was thoroughly known about to the local authorities. It was a question of a prompt action not being taken. It was not a question of the child not being known. In the April 2019 guidelines, which the Department went over very thoroughly in consultation with home educators, local authorities—all sorts of people—



they spelled out very clearly the process and the tools that the local authority has, right down to the most serious cases. There are ample powers within the present framework if they are used when there are these concerns.

Councillor Nethsingha: I absolutely recognise those cases and I think that, while what Jane says may be true in one of those cases, there are other cases where it is really important that some contact is kept with children in home schooling situations. I absolutely support the Children's Commissioner's view. I do not think that training is enough. I think there is a need for changes to the statutory framework. Local councils simply do not have the powers to make sure that they can keep in touch with children in cases where parents are not being co-operative.

In the vast majority of cases, parents are co-operative and there are good relationships between local authorities and home-educating parents. We are talking about the very small number of cases where that is not the case, and in those situations at present councils do not have the powers they need to check on the safety of children.

Mrunal Sisodia: There is a lot of focus at the moment on statutory powers. As Lucy says, there is a very small minority where those powers are necessary. There is also a really strong case to be made for softer outreach from local authorities and local areas. Local schools could be brought in as well, in the sense that you can either force parents to engage with the local authority or you can make it very attractive for them to engage with local areas if they are home-educating. There are some really great examples where local areas and local schools have set up outreach services to support families who are home-educating and then it does not become an enforcement issue at all; it becomes an issue of genuinely supporting the wellbeing and education of young people. One example of that is the PLACE scheme in Bedford—place-programme.org—which is outstanding.

Jenny Coles: I absolutely agree with what has been said. The numbers now mean that local authorities are not resourced to do this, and that increase in numbers does require some sort of resource. But if it is attractive; if there is from the beginning the meeting that is in the 2019 regulations, as Jane was saying; if that system is put in place with the school to make sure parents understand what they are taking on—and we know the options for parents around quality assurance and voluntary accreditation, and all that helps—then those families who do not co-operate in that stand out. It might be a minority, but we do have increased numbers now. We cannot turn our minds away from some of the risks that might be involved, and the importance of ensuring that families can get help early on.

Q6 **Chair:** On the register issue: as you know, Lord Soley and respected MP Frank Field sponsored the Home Education (Duty of Local Authorities) Bill—a private Member's Bill—which would place on local authorities a



duty to monitor the educational, physical and emotional development of home-educated children; would require parents to register the home-educated child with the local authority; would require the local authority to assess each child annually; and would require the relevant guidance to be updated with the expectation that home education include provision of supervised instruction in reading, writing and numeracy, taking into account the needs of parents and children who elect to home-educate. What is the panel's view on that? It correlates with the Children's Minister, as I mentioned previously, calling for a home education register to identify who is being home-educated and the state of their education. Amanda Spielman from Ofsted, the Chief Inspector, has suggested a basic registration requirement. There are quite a lot of serious people in education and Parliament calling for a register and some assessment of the attainment levels of children who are being home-educated. What are the panel's views on that?

Mrunal Sisodia: I think we are all agreed on some sort of register and a better grip on who is being home-educated and why. When you start moving into the sphere of starting to gauge success, what a successful home education looks like and assessing attainment in that way, that is starting to get into slightly rockier territory. The reason for that is that the reason why many children are home-educated—clearly those with SEND where it is a positive choice—is because their family has decided that perhaps the very narrow rigours of an academic education is not right for them. That is not to say that it is wrong for them, but they are seeking a more holistic, rounded experience for their young people that may be better representative of their strengths and their interests than an assessment and attainment-based system perhaps might force you down.

Q7 **Chair:** Jane, I think you said a register would be expensive, if I am not mistaken, in your evidence. Can you please give your views?

Jane Lowe: Yes. We have always felt that registers would be not a wise use of the money involved. It would cost an enormous amount to set up a register.

Q8 **Chair:** How much?

Jane Lowe: We had a chap from Citibank, a financial analyst, way back in 2010, and he worked out that there would be several scenarios that could result from registration and monitoring, and particularly the draconian monitoring that was proposed at that time. He said it could easily run to £500 million just to set the thing up, and it could cause the collapse of the home education movement because it would put enormous pressure on parents. It would mean that someone who was a stranger came into their home—their living environment. Many children are out of education or out of school because they are disturbed, they are unhappy, they have had bad experiences, and to have local authority officials pursuing them into their home would cause immense distress. In



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real terms, it would probably cause more distress than following up on families where there are genuine concerns.

Councillor Nethsingha: The register is very important, for the safeguarding reasons that we talked about earlier. The issue of monitoring the standard of education is much more difficult. I tend to agree with Mrunal on this, that one of the reasons why some children leave formal education is because of the stress and the pressure of particular expectations and home education allows more freedom. We do not want to then remove all that freedom. I think you need some very simple standards, and monitoring that is really tricky.

I want to come back to the point that Jenny made about home visits. This is something that is perhaps misunderstood. What councils need is to be able to see a child. If there is parental co-operation about that, there is no need for that to take place in the home. It is only in cases where there is not parental co-operation that there is a need to be able to have some legal force behind that.

Q9 **Chair:** Presumably a child could be seen at a school nearby?

Councillor Nethsingha: Or in a park. You could arrange a place. There are plenty of places outside of home that you could arrange to have a meeting if there is co-operation.

Jenny Coles: ADCS fully supports the local authority having a register, not least, as I have said before, because of the increase in numbers, and the ability then to be able to offer advice and support. Monitoring would have to be looked at quite carefully, though.

Q10 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have a couple of questions on the register, if I may. Ms Lowe, could I ask you about the cost of the register? I understand there will be a cost to the local authority, which would obviously be borne by local authorities, and ultimately Government and taxpayers, of setting up such a register. Why do you feel that it would be so costly to the parents to register? Presumably it would be no more than an online registration or a stamp. Why do you feel it is oppressive to be registered? Presumably, all those children will be registered with a general practitioner, so they are known in a way to an authority, if you like. Why is it any more oppressive to have them on a register of how they are being educated?

Jane Lowe: I did not mean that it would be a cost to the parent. I understand it would cost about £1,000 per child to set up a register in the local authority.

Q11 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** You seem to suggest that it could cause a collapse of home education because of the cost.

Jane Lowe: Not because of the cost, but because of the intrusion into families' private lives, where there is no justification for that.



Q12 Dr Caroline Johnson: I really want to understand this from your perspective. How does having a child on a register, on a list somewhere at the local authority so that they know they are having home education, cause such intrusion?

Jane Lowe: There is already a list of families, children known to the local authority, but that does not tell you anything about the home education; it does not tell you anything about the child. A register itself will give you nothing that you do not already know. It might give you the names and addresses of children who are in home education who are not known to the local authority, but having done that you have to investigate further. That is where the cost and the intrusion comes in. Without a programme of monitoring and seeing the children, having a list of them tells you nothing. Families have made this point over many years—that you do not know any more if you have their names and addresses. You do not know any more about their education. It is only when you start to send people out, or arrange monitoring visits—that is when it becomes intrusive.

Q13 Dr Caroline Johnson: You would not say that being obliged to be on a register is of itself intrusive? You just feel that it will lead to home visits, which you may consider intrusive?

Jane Lowe: Unless you follow up the people on the register you don't know any more about them. You don't know anything about them. That is what families have always said to us—that without monitoring and inspection and all the panoply of intrusion that goes with it, you won't know any more than you did before. Just having a name and address—it is not like a doctor's register. There the family can go to the doctor if they are registered with that GP, but when the local authority has a list of families, unless they go and investigate those families they are not going to know any more. It will not bring any safety to the child, will it?

Q14 Dr Caroline Johnson: One of the things we will probably come to later is outcomes. Would the register not help us to know how many children are not in education, how many children may need support at home, how many children we might need to provide different opportunities for, perhaps—even how old the children are? I struggled with the brief, reading about this, to work out whether children are mostly home-educated in primary school or at secondary school level. Would it not give us a bit of data on how old these children are and how they are doing, and where children have gone back into school and been supported to do so if they have left in difficult circumstances—what worked and how to help support families in the future?

Jane Lowe: All these suggestions imply a great deal of data, a great deal of investigation. The simple fact of having a list of families will not tell you anything unless you follow them all up. That is where the cost and the bureaucracy and the intervention all comes in; and that is what families are so worried about, because they feel it is completely unnecessary. Local authorities already know of the children about whom there are concerns. Those are the ones that could be followed up.



Somebody said recently that if you are looking for a needle in a haystack then it is not sensible to increase the size of the haystack. That seems to me an image for what we are talking about here.

Q15 Dr Caroline Johnson: Do any other witnesses want to comment before I hand back to the Chair?

Councillor Nethsingha: Jane is right that registering the children will not necessarily flag up the difficult ones. It does allow you then to make contact with those parents who are happy to be contacted. At that point you reduce the size of the haystack very significantly, because you can find those parents who are not in regular contact with somebody. Those are the ones that there is a concern about. This is all about, from a safeguarding point of view, identifying the children who you should have worries about. One of the roles of a register is to rule out all those children that you don't need to have worries about. That is one of the reasons why the register is so important.

We will not be making intrusive visits if we don't feel they are necessary—if parents are happily in contact with the local authority and with other groups. Local authority resources are incredibly stretched. We have enough difficulty meeting the needs of children in need already; we do not need to make more work for ourselves. It is just that we do need to make sure that we have some contact with this tiny minority of children and that we know they are safe.

Chair: Because of time I am going to bring in Tom Hunt with his question; would you answer both questions at the same time, Jenny?

Q16 Tom Hunt: It definitely seems as though there is an issue here with regards to SEND. I have spoken to a number of constituents who have been home-schooling when the schools closed whose children have special educational needs. I spoke to a mother whose child had autism and said it worked pretty well. She was able to provide much more tailored support for her child. Sadly, it is not an option for her to home-school long-term. They will have to go back to a mainstream school.

I am an associate governor of a special school in Ipswich, which provides excellent support but has a finite number of spaces. If we are of a view that elective home education is often parents feeling that they have no choice but to home-educate because their children have specific special needs and that tailored support is not being provided in a mainstream setting and there is a lack of special schools, a lack of special school places, what do you think part of the approach here needs to be to provide that support? Is it more special schools? Is it better support in mainstream settings? Of course the answer is probably a bit of both, but I would be interested to know your thoughts.

Jenny Coles: That is exactly the reason for having a register. It is not just about safeguarding and funding support to families and children that need it, but also for children that do have education, health and care plans to know who they are and support and make sure that if parents



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still want to continue to home-educate then they are getting the access to the services that they need and the educational support they need. That is a really good example.

We also need to look at the reasons why. We have a rising number of parents who want to home-educate. What does that say about the services and the education system nationally and locally? We need to look at significant areas where we need to improve and look at the resources that are provided.

The register would provide data when young people are coming to sit exams. Of course, last summer threw up real issues around this, where we didn't have the full data. That would be extremely helpful, to make sure that young people have the full access, to ensure they achieve their potential.

Mrunal Sisodia: There are two points I would like to make. The first is around how we stop parents and families getting to the point where they feel they are faced with this Hobson's choice, which is home education or exclusion or the criminal justice system or some form of mental health or hospital setting for their child. Many, many parents come to us with that sort of dilemma. In that situation there is really no choice, and it is not a positive choice.

The key to stopping that happening is that at the moment services intervene and parents and families get support when they reach crisis point, but that is too late. Time and again we hear that families are going along to schools and saying, "I have got a concern about my child" and that concern isn't listened to. Six months later, families are going along to services and saying, "I have a problem." Nothing is done. It is only six months later, when that family hits crisis, that some sort of intervention happens. Sadly, it is at that point that families feel forced to take their child out of school.

Once children with SEND are outside of school—and I think, Tom, you are exactly right, many do thrive and that is a longer conversation to unpick why that is and what could be changed in the school environment to enable them to thrive in the school environment. But when they are at home what we find is that the support for all children, and particularly children with SEND, is a real postcode lottery. Some local areas have really good outreach. We did a survey of our forums and only 71% of local areas had a home education policy and only 57% of those areas that had a home education policy actually talked about SEND in it. The specialised support and care that families with SEND need is very rarely available through the home education support that is offered. That is really pedagogy, it can be equipment and it can be one-to-one support. Where parents have made that positive choice we would like to see that support in place.

Q17 **David Simmonds:** This is a very quick question on home visits and seeing a child. One of the things that is characteristic of the cases that



you have mentioned—Dylan Seabridge, Khyra Ishaq and so on—was that people went to visit families who were said to be electively home-educated and were refused access. Unless they could substantiate safeguarding concerns they could not get access to the child and the child subsequently died. I would like to ask the panel what they think would be an appropriate set of enforcement powers where there are genuine concerns. Do they think that needs to be linked legally to, for example, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, because of course a lot of this seems to presume that children are treated as their parents' property, whereas in fact the children have rights and it is the duty of the state to ensure that those rights are respected.

Jenny Coles: In terms of why a register needs to be mandatory, that absolutely sums that up. With that come the right sort of duties and responsibilities on the local authority, but absolutely on parents as well. We might all say that has been a few, but they were really extremely sad and distressing cases and we have to learn from those. I go back to Lucy's point—that in by far the majority of cases those powers are not going to be needed, but local authorities have a safeguarding duty for all children in their area, as do other partners.

Jane Lowe: So many of the children who have had tragic outcomes have been well-known to the local authority, but the local authority has not acted in time. It is a question of timely intervention. Khyra Ishaq is a case in point. The school was notifying the local authority that the child and her siblings were going down the bins looking for food and the child's name was never taken off the roll by the parent. The child was still on the roll and the school knew very well that there was a severe problem there. This is not a home education problem; this is a question of timely response to known concerns. Dylan Seabridge was the same. In many of these cases there has been ample knowledge but action has not been taken in time.

Councillor Nethsingha: Part of the issue here is that there is a gap in the legislation, which means that it is extremely difficult, if a child is not attending school, to get the evidence to say that there is a safeguarding problem. Until you have that evidence to say that there is a safeguarding problem, it is very difficult for councils to act. That is why we need to have this register—so that we can have contact with children and have a reason for having contact with children, in order to be able to identify any safeguarding concerns and take those actions that Jane correctly says need to be taken in a timely manner. It is very difficult to take those actions in a timely manner if we have no evidence.

[Ian Mearns took the Chair.]

Q18 **Christian Wakeford:** The first question is mainly to Mrunal and Jane. We have touched on some of the negative reasons why children have gone into home education, whether that is off-rolling, lack of SEN provision or potentially not getting the choice of school that particular parents wanted. Could you possibly touch on some of the positives for



parents electing for home education?

Jane Lowe: We have talked to thousands of parents, we have had thousands of parents come to us for advice and support to find their own way in home education. There have been many parents who have had unfortunate experiences in school with their children, they have taken them out of school and they have taken a while to settle down to home education, to find their way, but we have found so often that parents have said to us that it was the best thing they ever did, they wish they had done it years ago, as I said just now, and they have an individualised education experience with their child. They can pick up things that have been overlooked, things that the child has not understood because they have been unhappy and not been able to learn properly. There have been many instances that we have come across where parents have been able to re-enthuse their child for education, where that enthusiasm has been lost. To us, that is a very important fact. Even if it starts negatively it can still be very successful in the longer-term.

Mrunal Sisodia: I echo a lot of that in the sense that particularly for children and young people with SEND we always say that nobody knows their children better than their parents. Many of you as parents would recognise that.

If you have the right resources and the right background to be able to support your child with SEND we do hear lots of stories of hugely reduced anxiety, behaviour improving, stress levels in the child and mental health improving, and we see all of these benefits for some young people with certain conditions who really thrive in the home environment. I think that what we are urging would be that has to be a conversation with parents around can some of those factors be put in place in a school environment? Let us be clear, school is a really good place for the majority of kids and there is a lot to be said for it, particularly the aspects of socialisation and the structure and rigour, but there are some aspects of school that do not work for other children. That co-production and that conversation with parents particularly where a child is finding things difficult is the key to making sure that we find the right environment and mix for each child and each family.

Q19 **Christian Wakeford:** In regard to the register it has been discussed many times. My own personal view is I think it would be beneficial not only to get a wider picture as to the home education environment but to potentially highlight some of those issues that are the negative ones. Why are children being forced out of school, whether it is off-rolling or whatnot? Again to Mrunal and Jane, from your different perspectives, what do you think accounts for the recent rise in home education?

Jane Lowe: Clearly what has been happening in the past few months has been down to parental fears about Covid and the possibility of infection coming into the home. That is going to account for the strange figures that we have at the moment, which the association has just released. Off-rolling was something you mentioned. Off-rolling is not a



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home education problem. If we are looking at that in terms of home education we are looking down the wrong end of the telescope. That is a problem that exists in administrative terms between schools and local authorities. Home education has been dragged into problems over the years. We have had truancy, we have had forced marriage, we have had the issue of children being unsafe and that kind of thing. These are all issues that have answers, and you are not going to improve the situation by adding to your view of home educators. It is a question of needing to follow up on the ones that you are concerned about. There are plenty of issues that need to be followed up quickly by local authorities and it is just a massive distraction to think of creating a register of families where you will not know any more about them until you put in another bureaucracy of inspection and monitoring. It is not really a very helpful way forward, in our view.

[Robert Halfon resumed the Chair.]

Chair: Christian, have you finished?

Christian Wakeford: I have one final question, Chair.

Ian Mearns: Rob, it is a supplementary to the point that has just been made. That is the problem.

Chair: Christian, I am going to let Ian come in on this.

Q20 **Ian Mearns:** When we did the inquiry, as a Select Committee, back in 2012 I think there were known to the inquiry fewer than 30,000 youngsters who were being home-educated at the time. I think the figure was round about 27,000 and I think that figure was roundly accepted by most people. There has been a growth in numbers of youngsters who are euphemistically being home-educated. That is not a description put by parents who properly home-educate their children. It is a term that is widely being used and in many cases incorrectly. There is not a problem at all with those parents and those children who are properly educating their children and those children who are being properly educated. If others out there, for different reasons, are saying that their child is home-educated, or a child is off-rolled by a school and the local authority are told that they are being home-educated, that does not mean to say that they are being properly home-educated.

There is a problem to look into. Would you accept, therefore, that this problem does need to be sorted out? I think it is a question of when a child is being home-educated and when are they not.

Councillor Nethsingha: I absolutely agree with what Ian is saying. Part of this is about not just having a register but about gathering some more data about who is being home-educated and why. Also, what the outcomes are. I think we need to be quite clear about the difference between monitoring carefully what education is being provided, which I am not sure is what we should be doing and would take a huge amount of resource and be very difficult, but monitoring outcomes is different. Making sure that children, towards the end of their period in education,



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are able to take exams, are able to move on into higher education or into work—that kind of monitoring of outcomes and collecting of more data is really important, so that we can get a proper picture of what is going on.

We know that there are many families where home education is fantastic and is a brilliant outcome for the family and children involved, but we need to be more aware of those cases where that is not the situation. There is also the big issue of unregistered schools, which we have not touched on yet.

Chair: We will come to that a bit later.

Jane Lowe: On the question of monitoring outcomes, we say it would be far better to offer some support in the form of easier access to exams than collecting data before we start. We know that home educators find it difficult to access exams so, rather than gathering data, why don't we put something in place? Why don't we put some funds into offering some support in that way? That was suggested back in 2012 and it didn't happen.

Jenny Coles: Ian was saying that the difference in numbers between 2012 and 2020 is really stark. To pick up Jane's point in the survey the top three reasons that local authorities were asked from their knowledge about home education were Covid-19, philosophy and also emotional health and wellbeing. The situation is now very different from where it was a few years ago, I think, or at least significantly different. We need to know what we are dealing with; that data will help in terms of pathways to exams and careers and the sort of information that we require around that, but also a whole range of other resources that might be around and to create some kind of quality assurance around that, or at least some voluntary framework, so that parents, know if their child is, for example, at a tutoring centre that is now online, what quality that is. Doing some thinking around that about the resources that are in the local area—and I do not mean doing a whole big quality assurance set-up. We need to look at monitoring and how there can be some kind of voluntary accreditation scheme. In some areas enough children are now being home-educated to fill a large secondary school.

Mrunal Sisodia: Picking up on a couple of points in the discussion there. The first is to build on what Jenny said around SEMH. We are certainly seeing huge feedback from our membership around an increasing number of difficulties for children with those sorts of conditions and concerns remaining successfully and thriving in school. While, yes, it is an opportunity for home education we have to call it out and say what it is, which is a failing in our school system and the wraparound for these children is to remain in school.

The second thing is, yes, we have certainly seen a Covid increase here. I do not know whether you want me to go into this now, but we have done a little bit of work into unpicking what that is. Jane is right to some extent in that it is fear of the disease, fear of the virus, but I think that is



really just scratching the surface. There is also a lot of disgust and frustration from families, particularly those with SEND, about how they were treated during the lockdown and the crisis. They are opting out. There is also some poor information out there. Some families still do believe that they can almost opt out of school for a period of time and their school place will still be there and they will still get some sort of blended learning when they come back, when everybody is vaccinated and we are all clear to go back in. Also, I think frankly some children did really respond well to being home-educated during lockdown and really did thrive. There are four or five reasons there.

Q21 Christian Wakeford: What challenges do you think parents face in providing home education—or, to turn the question on its head, what more support could be provided?

Jane Lowe: I do think that there should be a small amount of money for people who choose to have a negotiation with the local authority who would like to have some access to exams. That could be done and it would improve relations between the local authorities and families. I don't think it is going to help if families are behind the barricades. It would be much more positive for the respectful attitude of local authorities to continue. Families will not be happy about the idea of being registered and monitored when they have the primary legal duty to educate their children. They will not take kindly to that. A much more gentle and respectful approach would be far better than the kind of barriers that this plan of registration and monitoring will set up.

Q22 Chair: Jane, in your submission you say that home education should be accorded equal status in law with state and independent education, so should be treated with the same respect as the other two systems. Is that correct?

Jane Lowe: It does have equal status in law, yes.

Q23 Chair: If it does have that equal status, surely children in school have to have a register, they have to be there both in the independent and the state sector, they have some kind of assessment. If there is equal status, surely that should apply for children who are being home-educated as well.

Jane Lowe: Thinking logically about what you just said, that would mean the parent calling the register every morning when they came down and started the day. Schools have their registers because schools have the authority delegated to them by parents to provide the education, so they are accountable. That sort of accountability with regard to every parent would be very difficult to set up. It would be hugely expensive, it would be very difficult to maintain accurately and it would not achieve anything.

Q24 Chair: Even though for equal status children have to do SATs and exams and if you have equal status, I am just asking the question, should that not be the case at home?



Jane Lowe: Yes, I understand what you are saying.

Chair: That is what equal status means—that they would do the SATs. Whether we agree with them or not is a different issue, but it is the law of the land for children who go to school.

Jane Lowe: We have always said that national tests were set up as a means of quality control within schools because parents have delegated their responsibility to educate, which is their primary duty. They have delegated that to the school system. They are not obliged to. They can retain that duty themselves. Because it is an individualised approach to education they know and they are very keen to make sure their children get the best. That is a natural instinct for a parent.

Chair: I am going to bring Tom in. Tom, with your question, could I ask the other witnesses to answer my question as well as Tom's at the same time? Tom?

Q25 **Tom Hunt:** I know Mrunal has mentioned SEMH pupils. The school where I am an associate governor of a special school specifically for those children with social, mental and emotional health needs; I do not know the story of each pupil but many of them have spent time out of the mainstream setting and some of them will have been home-schooled. That school is unique inasmuch as it has been designed from scratch. The head teacher has pretty much designed the whole building, so it has pastoral buildings, therapeutic rooms; it is specifically designed with those pupils in mind. It is early days, but the signs are encouraging and, touch wood, it is going to have a transformative effect. Would you say that if it is the case that there are many parents who feel forced to take their kids out of mainstream schools when they have those special needs, does it need to be the case that the Government need to provide that extra funding so we can produce more of these special schools? Would that be your view? Would that be part of the solution?

Chair: I think I will ask Mrunal to answer that and then invite the other witnesses to answer my previous question.

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes and no. I think if you look at the cost to the local authority of high-needs funding blocks and those children that are sent out of county or borough for education, very often to very expensive, faraway provisions, there is a huge cost associated with supporting the lack of provision locally, particularly around things like SEMH and complex ASD. There is clearly a need for more local provision around this, because the alternative is either a very expensive, faraway placement—families do not want their children to be educated 100-plus miles away—or very often sadly this is what Tier 4 children's units are for. Clearly we want to avoid those admissions as much as we can.

I also think there is a really strong case for providing much stronger wraparound support in schools for conditions such as SEMH and for health services, social care services and education services working together. There have been some really interesting pilots done in the



north-east recently around accelerated projects where mental health services have been working hand-in-glove with schools. We have seen things like exclusion rates for those pilot schools reduced by 90%. It can happen but it is around wraparound support to the child in a place that makes sense to them. Sometimes that place will be a special school but for most children, the majority of children with SEMH, it is going to be in the mainstream school with the right support at the right time in that mainstream school.

Q26 Tom Hunt: To quickly add on that, as it stands every pupil at the school I am talking about comes from Ipswich, but I appreciate there is some interest from Essex nearby. The cost of providing places for all of those pupils would be prohibitive, it sounds.

Mrunal Sisodia: I was probably referring to the sort of provision that was looked at by Christine Lenehan's review a couple of years ago.

Councillor Nethsingha: Following up on Tom's question and yours, I absolutely agree with Mrunal that making sure that mainstream schools and the support between schools and local authorities and other voluntary sector organisations often in making sure that children get a blend of sensible education that suits them is really important. Special schools are a very expensive way of treating children, of managing children who are not managing in mainstream education. The current mainstream education system is extremely unfriendly to children with special needs. We need to try to look at that system as a whole and make sure that it is more inclusive than it is at present. The high stakes testing, the only end-of-year exams, all of those sorts of things are very difficult for children and very stressful for children with special needs. We need a much more inclusive mainstream education as a first resort rather than looking to special schools as the answer.

To come back to your statutory point, I do not think we want to make home education too difficult for people. It is often a really good outcome for some children and I think it is really important that we recognise that. It is about making sure that we do have safeguards in place and that is I think why the register is so important.

Q27 Chair: Do you not need to make sure that while the vast majority of parents are educating their children brilliantly, that there are genuine life chances and the children do have good outcomes when they finish their home education, as we do for children in schools?

Councillor Nethsingha: I think that is about looking at outcomes rather than necessarily tracking all the way through. We do need to allow parents some flexibility to make judgments about what is appropriate for their child.

Q28 Chair: If you look at the outcomes is that not looking at it quite late in the system?



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Councillor Nethsingha: Yes, I think it is looking at it quite late in the system. I also think it would be extremely difficult to do that tracking well and very intrusive to parents. If you are going to go down the track of looking at what education is provided all the way through then there is a huge resource issue about how that happens. Councils at the moment are absolutely not resourced to do that work.

Chair: Jenny, briefly.

Jenny Coles: In terms of the first question around SEND one hopes that the SEND national review will pick up some of these issues. We look forward to it being published hopefully next year.

The second thing, I think there are rights and responsibilities across the piece here and they have to be taken equally. I will go back to the numbers are now increasing. Local authorities want to support home education, but do it in a responsible way and I am sure parents do. With that responsibilities sometime mean that you have to have within that set-up something that brings in a mandatory element. ADCS says that is the register, but how you would monitor we would have to think quite carefully about so it is productive and good for children on both sides.

Chair: Kim, if you could be patient for a minute I am just going to bring Caroline in on this point. Thank you.

Q29 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I want to pick up on the outcomes, while that seems to be in discussion at the moment. When I looked at the brief yesterday I thought to myself that we are going to talk about home education today, and I would be interested to learn more about how many children are home-educated, how old are these children, how long are they in home education for, do they come in and out of school, how many of them have special education needs, how many have made a choice to home-educate, how many have chosen home education as a last resort because they have had problems at school? How do the outcomes for these children in terms of academic and employment attainment compare with a cohort of matched children of age and ability in a school? I could not find the answers really to any of those questions. I do not know if any of you could answer those questions. Do you know the answer to those questions and do you think the state has an obligation to the children being home-educated to know the answers to those questions? If so, how would you go about doing it?

Jane Lowe: Again, we have to remember that the primary educator of the child is the parent. There are lots of questions that we cannot answer. We should trust the parent. In most cases we should trust the parent, because the parent does have this primary duty, the same as they have the primary duty to feed, clothe and nurture their child. The education system is there to support them in that duty but I think we have to understand that parents want the best for their children.

Q30 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do you think it is important for the state to know the answer to these questions or do you think it is fine for us not to know



the answers?

Jane Lowe: Trying to put into place the mechanics to know the answers to these questions is going to demand a huge amount of resource, and Lucy made that point just now. In these straitened times particularly we should be using those resources to support across the board, to improve on SEN resources, as Mrunal was saying, and to offer resources to parents that they can accept if they wish. It should not be forced upon them.

Q31 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Do you think that knowing the answers to these questions would mean perhaps that home education would increase? If we found that certain children really did exceptionally well or that certain children with certain educational needs issues were supported best in the home environment, or particularly a small environment, that would lead to better outcomes for children across the board, if we knew the answers to these questions? Lucy?

Councillor Nethsingha: I absolutely agree with you, Caroline, that there is a real need for more data on this, a really urgent need for more data. My concern about resources was not about the register or about collecting outcome information. It was about monitoring all the way through, which I think is tricky. I think that there is an absolute need for more data on how many children, what the reasons are, what age groups they are and whether they have special educational needs and disabilities. I think we desperately need more information on those things.

Jenny Coles: I absolutely agree. Without that information we have no idea about the answers to your questions other than the survey that the ADCS does. We have a change in nature now of children that have been educated at home and we cannot begin to look into quality of education and resources on offer and indeed parents cannot unless we have a collective, better understanding of the needs of children that are being home-educated in local areas.

Mrunal Sisodia: From my point of view I think that the key thing to record is to understand why the child is being educated at home. That enables us to provide the right support. A real note of caution on monitoring again, which is that one of the reasons that children may be home-educated is because families are looking for more holistic outcomes. What constitutes success for one family and one child is not easily transferable to another. I think it is very difficult to come up with those overarching outcomes that make sense to all children, be it in the home education environment or in the school environment. It is certainly something we are looking for. To pick on something that Jenny and Lucy have said, much more holistic measures of what a successful childhood looks like, other than just exams.

Q32 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. My question is to Jenny. We have heard that your organisation produces an annual survey about elective



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education and as we have heard today most recently published yesterday. There has been an increase in numbers. Can you tell us whether you have seen any trends identified in that report? Also, if there are any gaps about outcomes for electively home-educated children. Jenny?

Jenny Coles: The trends in terms of as I said before the three top reasons that local authorities gave that parents had told them and remember this is a survey and not every parent would answer all the questions, is first of all in response to Covid-19. That was the biggest, closely followed by philosophy around home education, which has always been there, and thirdly around emotional health and wellbeing. Following on from that was disenchantment with their child's school and disengagement from that process. Those themes have emerged. The second two have been in previous surveys, so clearly are an issue as to why parents are home-educating.

In terms of outcomes the survey does not collect that. That goes back to our lack of ability and ways of collecting data in this area. We do not have that unfortunately.

Q33 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of the survey, do you collect data from parents across protective characteristics, given that there are a disproportionate number of exclusions of black boys from school and is there any evidence that they may end up being home-educated?

Jenny Coles: Our survey does not pick up that but some local areas do small-scale local surveys and are starting to do that more. That feeds into my point that unless we have at the very least a register that we know every parent registers their child on if they are home-educating we cannot begin to look at those really important issues particularly around school exclusions.

Q34 **David Simmonds:** To all the panel, how consistently do you think local authorities carry out their duties and responsibilities in respect of elective home education? A linked question, and you may only have an idea of the answer to this, but given everything that has happened in the world of education especially around the reduction of any centrally-retained funding for things like educational welfare, what challenges do you think locally authorities face in carrying out their duties?

Councillor Nethsingha: I am sure local authorities are all carrying out their statutory duties but there is quite some ambiguity about what other duties there are beyond the bare minimum. There is less consistency across local authorities on the level of support that they give to parents who are home-educating. That is not so much a statutory requirement. There is some ambiguity around what the expectations are but there are also wide variations across local authorities in terms of the resources that are available to them to provide that resource. I think that is the key issue that is a big problem for local authorities. Already in many local authorities the budgets for special educational needs services are



massively overstretched. I am sure you are all aware of the huge problems in the high needs block funding deficit. For many authorities they are trying to save pennies wherever they can and given this is not a statutory service continuing to provide and increase support for increasing numbers of parents who are choosing to home-educate is very difficult. There are some councils who are doing a fantastic job in that and I think Essex is one example and there is a very good response to your inquiry from them. There are other really good examples around the place of councils who are doing a superb job in supporting parents, but there are other authorities, sometimes very small ones, who simply do not have the capacity to be able to support home-educating parents as much as they would like to. It is not consistent.

Chair: I should declare an interest and thank you for mentioning my local council of Essex. They will be very happy. Jenny?

Jenny Coles: I cannot say much more than Lucy. It is the increase in numbers where the pressures are. Local authorities on the whole are certainly doing the minimum, but the increase in numbers and knowing that they should be doing more. The 2019 additional duties, which are good ones, around the meeting when a child is likely to be removed from school and then providing that support to parents who probably did not intend to home-educate is really important. Also the whole range of quality of provision that might be on offer to parents, local authorities do not have the resources to at least be able to advise around that and to have first, the numbers, and secondly to offer a better service beyond what is the bare minimum, because that is what children deserve.

Mrunal Sisodia: To build on that, yes, what we hear is very much a postcode lottery particularly for children with SEND. I will not say a great deal more on that. That has been borne out by everybody else.

There is a lot of focus on local authorities at the moment but for children with additional needs in particular, we need to extend that focus to the health services as well, particularly for CCGs and therapy services, such as speech, language and occupational therapy. Again, those services are under strain and the fact that a child is being educated at home or in school should make no difference. We would still want occupational therapy, speech and language therapy to be delivered to those children.

These wraparound services are often the things that make a huge difference in a young person's ability to learn, getting their environment right, and getting the therapeutic support right can make a huge difference to their learning, regardless of whether it is in school or at home.

Q35 **Chair:** We argued in our special educational needs report that in terms of the EHCP, the health part was often not as good as it should be. In essence non-existent in many cases.



Jane Lowe: I just want to come in on a couple of things. One is the question of support. The families that we talk to, and there are many, do not perceive anything much as being supportive. Families get tremendous amounts of information from their own networks. There are enormous numbers of Facebook groups and other social networking groups, local groups. There is an exams Wiki, which has tremendous information about taking exams, very detailed, specific information. Lots of people pool their experiences.

When we talk to families about support from their local authority, they look puzzled because they do not feel that they are getting any support. The things that came out of the last Select Committee inquiry were things like access to FE colleges and the whole issue around exams. As far as information about how to go about it, information about resources and all that, the best form of support that families find comes from other home educators. Without wishing to be rude, it does seem that what the local authority offers is investigation but not particularly supportive. I felt I should say that.

Q36 **David Simmonds:** It sounds, as a minimum, given that resources are not just about money, that a mandatory register is the minimum necessary resource for local authorities, both to manage the risk and to begin the conversation about what additional support would be required. I can see Jenny and Lucy nodding vigorously. Do the members of panel agree with that or have an alternative view?

Jane Lowe: It comes back to what I was just saying about support. Support should not be forced on people; support should be offered and that does not necessarily imply a register. If support was offered, if there was any funding for it, then families could get in touch and then they would become known to the local authority. That might go some way towards assuaging people's fears.

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes, a register that helps us understand the reasons why people are home educating and the needs of that cohort so that they can be better supported is something we would very much support.

Jenny Coles: Yes, absolutely. The responsibility of education is a big one on parents so why wouldn't you want to register that that is what you are doing for your child? I do not see any reason why parents wouldn't want to understand that they need to register their child if they are home-educating as they register them in school.

Councillor Nethsingha: I completely agree that the register is the minimum. It is a bare minimum in terms of the need to make sure that children are safe and that they are getting some support. It would be very nice to be able to offer a lot more support in response to what Jane was saying. I do think there is an issue about exams and it would be fantastic if local authorities were able to offer more support. We need to be very wary of the resource implications for that in a system that is already extremely stretched.



Q37 **David Simmonds:** In summary, it sounds as if the evidence is if there is not a register then we cannot offer support because we do not know that the child is there possibly needing it. It seems very clear.

Jane Lowe: If support is offered and parents came forward then you would know about the parents. It does not mean you would have to have a register before you offered support.

Q38 **Chair:** What would happen to the parents who did not come forward who may need help?

Jane Lowe: Parents should be able to choose if they want to come forward. I cannot see why it should be forced upon them.

Q39 **Apsana Begum:** I wanted to ask some questions about the impact of Covid-19 itself and what positive and negative impacts you think that the pandemic has had on children who are electively home-educated? What you have said today, Mrunal, has touched upon that with sometimes poor information or maybe some children who have not as much support or how blended learning might have been beneficial. There are some that would say that temporary home education is not the same as elective home education. What are your views on the impact of the pandemic on home education itself?

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes, I completely agree with you that the remote learning that many schools are offering over the period of lockdown is not the same as home education. That is a very important distinction to make. There are two points leading from that. Covid doubled down on disadvantaged children, disadvantaged groups. They needed up being doubly disadvantaged through the lockdown period. I will not go into details there. We are all cognisant of what has been happening there.

To your point exactly, some of the requests we have seen around home education coming through post-Covid is under the misunderstanding that some support from schools will be considered or that school places will be held open.

Again, Chair, this goes somewhat to your point that it is very important that we understand the families when they are making the choices around home education understand what choices they are making. That is an informed, long-term choice. As long as parents have the right support to make that choice correctly, absolutely it is the parental right to choose. It is very important that those families who perhaps are disadvantaged themselves get that right support to make the right choices.

Q40 **Apsana Begum:** What additional support could be put in place, do you think, in light of the pandemic?

Mrunal Sisodia: For home educated children in particular or more SEND funds?

Apsana Begum: Yes.



Mrunal Sisodia: It goes back to some of the points I was making before, which is around—particularly for children and young people with SEND—outreach from schools and making lessons available. Some of the things that have come out of the pandemic, such as the Oak National Academy and some of the things the BBC is doing around home lessons for children is going to be great. It is going to be a great resource for home educators but around children with special needs it is access to the specialist services, the specialist pedagogy that special needs children sometimes require, that parents are just not equipped to provide. Sometimes it is materials and equipment, sometimes it is additional one-to-one support and sometimes it is the therapy services.

Councillor Nethsingha: I just want to pick a particular point, which is I think Covid has led to many more children being home-educated and parental fear about infection and risk at school is a big part of that. It will be interesting to see, as the pandemic, we hope, fades next year how many of those children come back into school.

Q41 **Chair:** The trend was going up hugely before Covid. It had doubled in a couple of years.

Councillor Nethsingha: Yes. The second point I want to make is that SEND children are absolutely not a block. For some of them the impact of moving school online has been very bad and very difficult. For children with dyslexia or dyscalculia, who find it difficult to access learning via a keyboard or via a screen, that makes it very hard for them. Then for other children, for whom part of the problem with school is anxiety, mental health concerns about the pressures there are in school, some of those have found home learning wonderful. We need to recognise that there have been different outcomes for different children and that for some of those children who do find school very difficult, the opportunity to have blended learning and to do more learning from home could be a good outcome from some of these moves we have had so far.

For some FE colleges, the ability to have more blended learning and more learning from home, which means pupils do not have to travel long distances at huge expense—

Chair: Okay. We are running behind time; I would ask you all to be as concise as possible.

Jenny Coles: I will be as concise as possible. I do not have a lot to add to what has already been said. It is not just about support to parents but information to parents, which is really important. Particularly those parents who may well have decided they have had a good experience and their children have during the last few months, but in the longer term do not realise that they will not have access to what the school was offering. For that group of parents, information is going to be absolutely key.



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Again, if we have the information about those parents, if they then choose to put their children back into the school system, that can be supported.

Jane Lowe: We have to understand that there are two categories here. You have the home educators who are already in existence that have been doing it for years and they have hunkered down and got on with it, they have missed their friends but they have been able to keep in touch with FaceTime and Zoom and this kind of thing. They have been fairly unaffected by it, apart from, as I say, the lack of social contact that they would normally have a great amount of. Then you have the other group, the ones we have been talking, parents who have withdrawn their children from school hastily because of fears—and very real ones when they have elderly relatives in the house or down the road that they are looking after—and they have, in many cases, really struggled. A lot of them will find their way back into school. Something that could be done to support them would be to help them come back when they are ready to come back, when things calm down.

Q42 **Apsana Begum:** The Committee has obviously taken an interest in the impact of exams cancellations on home-educated candidates. We had an oral evidence session with Ofqual in September and the Executive Director for General Qualifications told us that it is difficult to know the precise figures of those that are home-educated who undertook exams because there are different experiences behind that, private candidates come in many different shapes and forms. The best data Ofqual had suggested about 3,300 private candidates got an A-Level grade this year, fewer than in a normal year.

Do you think that should be of concern? If local authorities responded better to requests for home-educated learning would the data also reflect that better?

Jane Lowe: The figure you quoted of about 3,000, we think probably between 3,000 and 6,000 if you count GCSE as well as A-Level. We have to accept that these are extraordinary circumstances and that children in school have been disadvantaged in many ways because they have not been able to access their school learning to the same extent that they would have done if this had not happened.

I do know that there is a group of home educators, which has been set up recently specifically to talk to Ofqual, JCQ, the awarding bodies, to try to find ways forward to mitigate the problems we had this year. Nobody can be blamed for what happened this year because who can argue with a pandemic. It is something we have to accept.

This group, as a body, is going to talk to the awarding bodies and we hope that will be positive.

Chair: Do any of the other witnesses want to comment briefly on that? No, thank you. Ian.



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Q43 **Ian Mearns:** Has Covid-19 had any significant impact on parents who electing to home-educate? Looking from a local authority perspective, have you witnessed anything that is specific to Covid-19 and the impact it has had on parents or home educators, or do you just not have enough data on that?

Jenny Coles: We don't have enough data on that but the fact that the survey showed that shot up to be one of the top three reasons, clearly gives us concern in terms of communication and reassurance to parents. Certainly local authorities will be looking at that because it is pretty significant in terms of reasons and that we have seen the numbers rise.

Q44 **Ian Mearns:** Going on from that to Mrunal and Jane, in particular, do you think if parents who are home-educating want any support from the local authority that there is any support or real tangible support available?

Jane Lowe: I have to say that we did hope there would be some support, particularly regarding entry to FE colleges and the access to exams. That has not happened since our last meeting, when you and I met all those years ago, it just has not happened.

Mrunal Sisodia: I think Jane is exactly right about exams. That is something we heard a lot about during Covid, particularly those difficulties for children who are home-educated and who do not have a formal tutor. Getting their teacher-assessed gradings done was a huge black hole for families.

We talked about support, we see a varying practice—there are some good examples but, sadly, Jane is right in the sense that the majority of the cases we hear the families are offered very little support by the local area. Going back to the stats I had earlier, in our recent survey only 71% of local areas had a home education policy.

Councillor Nethsingha: Just to pick up very quickly on that one to say I absolutely agree. It is extremely patchy and the current pressures on local authority budgets are likely to mean it would remain that way unless there are more resources and more statutory requirements. Local authorities are struggling to meet their statutory commitments and trying to provide more support when it is not a statutory requirement and there is not any extra funding will be very difficult.

Q45 **Ian Mearns:** What more support would be required? I cannot help but think—I have not been a local authority member myself for an awful lot of years and being on this Committee now for 10 years—an awful lot of parents go down the route of home-educating out of frustration of trying to get what used to be called a statement of special education needs, now an education, health and care plan for their children. Is that a legitimate concern?

Councillor Nethsingha: Yes. There are real problems in trying to get EHCPs and to try to get the funding for the services that are required



there. There are probably even bigger problems in trying to get mainstream schools to provide the support that they ought to, because all the financial drivers are in the wrong direction for mainstream schools. There is no incentive for mainstream schools to support or help special needs children or children just with anxiety or mental health problems to stay in school. All the drivers are for them to get rid of those children off their rolls and that is an appalling situation.

Jenny Coles: There are very few local authorities in the country that are not stretched financially around special educational needs and disability and wanting to implement the legislation. There is something about resources but also expectations from the system. I just wanted to add that.

Again, I hope the SEND review picks that up because it is a real issue to make sure that children get the best education and wraparound support that they require.

Mrunal Sisodia: You are exactly right. There is a crisis in SEND and some of that is manifesting itself in an increase in home education. Again, you are right about the difficulty in getting an EHCP but I would also like to make sure we don't lose sight of those children and young people who do not have an EHCP, and perhaps do not need one, on the SEND support register. Lucy is right, the incentives for mainstream schools to be inclusive are very poor indeed. In fact, they are actively disincentivised to be inclusive and that does lead to a pressure on, frankly, some schools just not wanting these children and rejecting them. That is where some of the pressure on home education is coming from.

Jane Lowe: Lucy's comments were about support in schools and that is a whole different matter. Many parents at home are quite happy to be independent, they are quite happy to do their own thing, to get on with it in their own way, to seek support from other home educators. For a long time families have said that they find the best support is from other more experienced families and from the organisations. It gives them a start and helps them to find their own way. That is what we do. We do not approve of any particular method of home educator. We want to help parents to find their own way, to find the way that suits their children.

Q46 **Ian Mearns:** From your perspective, Jane, would you accept, though, that some parents go down the route of trying to electively home-educate because of the frustrations that they have in the school system not meeting the needs of their children?

Jane Lowe: Absolutely, this has been the case ever since the beginning. We have known this for the past 20 or more years that families do sometimes decide to go it alone because they feel they have no choice. That is not necessarily a bad outcome. It can happen that they take off, they focus on the needs of their child, they enjoy the experience and they say it is the best thing they have ever done. That in itself isn't wrong.



Q47 Tom Hunt: I could not agree more about we should not be treating SEND people as one big block. Each child is different. Many could have been disadvantaged by home learning. A lot of them would have had relationships with particular teachers at school that they depended upon to help them navigate the environment. Yes, as a dyspraxic pupil myself, I really struggled with IT and continue to. That also extends to exams. The prospect of not having exams would be feared by some but could be good for others.

Regarding this question about the mainstream settings and how we can change a framework to incentivise mainstream schools to provide as good a provision as they can for SEND pupils, practically how do you think it could be changed? Presumably in the way Ofsted assess schools you could put a greater weight on it. What might it look like?

Mrunal Sisodia: Tom, we have recently done an exercise explicitly looking at that question. How do we make mainstream schools more inclusive? You are right, some of it is about money, some of it is about changing the focus of what a good school looks like and what success looks like for a school, so making it less academic and much more holistic. Some of it is around them being responsible for representing their local community and putting a greater emphasis on that. Some of it is about inspection. There is a whole bunch of levers that we can use around this but it starts with the values and ethos of the school wanting to educate its community.

Councillor Nethsingha: Very quickly, there is a very simple first step, which is that at the moment the first £6,000 of any special needs support comes straight out of the school budget. If your school identifies a child with special educational needs, that is £6,000 out of your budget immediately. That is a cost that comes off other children's—in the majority of cases that is more than the value of that pupil to the school. As soon as you have a pupil who is identified as needing special needs support, that pupil costs the school more than they bring in. That incentive is absolutely the wrong way around, it needs to change.

Mrunal Sisodia: If I could just add there, one of our members said recently there is a disincentive for schools to admit that a child has special needs.

Q48 Kim Johnson: My next two questions are for Mrunal and Jane. Mrunal, in your opening statement you mentioned that you believed that for some parents, elective education was not a choice. In your experience, what proportion of parents have been pushed into home-educating due to off-rolling and exclusion?

Mrunal Sisodia: "I don't know" is the honest answer to that. I am afraid we just do not have the data to answer that question, but if you look at the stories we hear, the failure of schools to meet needs, exclusions leading to home education, off-rolling, children falling out at transition points between primary and secondary school—a lot of the drivers there



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do seem to be around the needs of the child not being met. I am afraid I do not have a percentage for you. I just do not have that data.

Q49 **Kim Johnson:** Jane, do you have anything to add on that question?

Jane Lowe: We also do not keep data on such things but from our experience of people's enquiries, I would say it is a very small number. The question of off-rolling is a school and local authority problem, it is not a problem that is caused by home education. As with all these other things, home educators are the victims of this.

There are rules and regulations about permanent exclusion and as far as we are able to work out, local authorities do provide the day six provision. Once the first six days have passed then it is the duty of the local authority to make provision and they do make provision. But at that point parents can choose, if they wish, to take them out if they do not like the provision that is offered. That is only right that they should have that option. Generally local authorities seem to be making provision because they have a statutory obligation. I do not think it is a massive issue, certainly for home educators.

Q50 **Kim Johnson:** Clearly, as has already been mentioned in the meeting today, collation of effective data information is key to establishing a clear picture.

My next question is aimed at Jenny and Lucy. How would your members describe the scale of the problems presented by off-rolling and excessive exclusions What is the impact of off-rolling and exclusion?

Chair: In a nutshell, if we can.

Councillor Nethsingha: It is a huge problem. It is something that we need to be worried about. The number of children who are missing from education is much higher than the number of children we have been talking about just in elective home education. I do think that this issue about children being off-rolled and just disappearing from the school system is a very big problem. That is probably all I have to say.

Jenny Coles: Yes, with exclusions we know that they were rising before the pandemic. Currently they seemed to have dropped down, in some areas significantly down, but also multi-academy trusts have been a concern as well. This is an absolute area that local authorities and, I know, the DfE are concerned about. Indeed we did have the report last year—the Timpson Report—that did have some good recommendations and was a good first step. We would welcome returning to that.

Chair: Our Select Committee also did a report on this, as you know. David Johnston.

Q51 **David Johnston:** A quick question on the same topic. Is the regulatory framework right for tackling those issues and, if it is not, what would you like to see changed?



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Councillor Nethsingha: A number of us have agreed there is a need for a change, for a register of children who are home-educated. There is also a need for much more checking on children who are coming off school rolls to make sure the education that is being provided for them is suitable. That is a slightly different conversation.

Jane Lowe: I think the regulatory framework is sufficient, it was very carefully spelt out in the DfE guidance that came out in April 2019. The money that would have to be spent on setting up a register that would not give you any more information other than the child's name and address could be better spent on some of the families are that already known about that are causing concern.

Q52 **David Johnston:** You are specifically answering about off-rolling and exclusion, right? We have talked quite a bit about the register so I was following on from Kim's question about off-rolling and exclusion and the practices there, and whether you thought there needed to be any changes with that. I was not seeking to go back to the register question.

Jane Lowe: Sorry. I beg your pardon. I would say from a home education point of view that is something that is beyond us. It is not a problem that is caused by home education in any way; it is a problem of administration and training in schools so that schools understand that they cannot tell parents that the local authority adviser will advise them how to home education.

This is something that parents are told; they tell us that this is what the school has told them. Other parents have come to us and said, "We have been told that the Home Education Advisory Service will send us learning packs." We are an advisory service. We are not a tutorial organisation. All over the country schools have said this but that is to do with lack of information. Schools need to know exactly what the position is when a child comes off roll and then they would not suggest to parents to take them off the roll.

Councillor Nethsingha: I had not realised that it is about this point specifically and I think that there are changes that are needed to the regulatory framework on this. Some of those are to do with the relationship between local authorities and MATs, in that local authorities have very little control over what happens in multi-academy trusts or any kind of academy schools and therefore we can't have the levers that we need to make sure that when children are excluded from school another place is found for them because we can't make MATs take them.

Q53 **David Johnston:** Jenny, is that what you were going to say?

Jenny Coles: Yes, I do think that the pandemic has brought a better partnership with schools across the piece and also with the Regional Schools Commissioner, who does have a role in this and has had an increased role since March and April working with the local authority. The other area is Ofsted, which is picking this up and will do so when they



return to full inspection. They do have a key role to play and they collate thing from their inspections. That will be a positive move as well.

Mrunal Sisodia: To answer your question very directly, it is far too easy for schools to off-roll. Can I quote you a case study? A family received a surprise letter saying their child had been removed from the school register after a period of authorised absence for mental health reasons. After tracing this back, it came back to the fact the school nurse had asked if their child was likely to return before the end of term, to which they replied, "I am not sure" because of mental health reasons. That was the most honest answer they could give and then the school used section 8.1(g) of the PPR regs to off-roll the child. It happens all the time. Children with special educational needs and SEMH concerns are off-rolled.

Chair: Which is illegal, as we know, and yet it still goes on. You raise an important point.

Q54 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** A quick question. For children who are in the later years of education, secondary school children, following quite a broad and in some cases very difficult curriculum, and thinking particularly of some GCSE A-Level aged students, what support do home educators have in providing for the subjects that parents may not have that level of expertise in?

Jane Lowe: Parents are remarkably inventive. When their child expresses a need or an interest in something they will, first of all, seek help from other home educators in the area. There is a massive amount of knowledge. You would not believe the amount of information that can be got from a few Facebook groups and similar things where people get together. There is this thing called the Wiki, where you have everybody contributing their experiences and people can then look up on this. It is the Wiki bit from Wikipedia and it is specifically about things like home education, exams, particular subjects, there are a number of them on the internet.

I think of how things have changed since I home-educated my children. We had telephone trees for getting social contact but now there is an absolutely vast amount that can be sought on the internet and from other families. Resources are much better than ever before and people can follow up the most arcane subjects because they can get the information and they can get online tuition if they want. The sky's the limit for families.

Councillor Nethsingha: That is absolutely true for families for whom this is a genuine choice and who have been doing it for some time. If you suddenly find yourself in a position of home-educating because your child can't cope with school any more in their GCSE or A-Level time, the ability to suddenly find all that information in a hurry while also dealing with a child with extra support needs is very stressful for some parents. There are difficulties again within the home-schooling community on what is available.



Jane Lowe: There is an enormous amount of information and the first thing people do is to turn to other families. They come to us every day. We can redirect them to people who know about things. There is a tremendous amount of information to help them. Yes, it is difficult but families who have a child, their own child, that they are desperate to help will leave no stone unturned to get what they need for those children. We see it every day.

Q55 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** You think the resources are available and it is more than achievable?

Jane Lowe: It is far easier now than it was in my day, I can tell you.

Mrunal Sisodia: Jane, you just said something really important there, which is again that when it is a positive choice that has been worked out by the family it is very important. But you used the words “desperate for help” and I would like to help families before they get to that point where they are desperate for help.

Q56 **Chair:** Does other member have any other question at all? No?

I will ask, finally. The Government guidance says there should be an appropriate minimum standard for children who are home-educated, enabling the child, when grown up, to function as an independent citizen in the UK and beyond the community that he or she is brought up if that is the choice made in later life by the child. That is important but does it need to be toughened up a little bit to say that children should get some exam qualifications or pass some tests or whatever it may be? Should Government guidance about what is expected for children in home education be better defined?

Councillor Nethsingha: In some ways the more important thing is not necessarily to do with exams but to do with PHSE support and the wider knowledge of the society they are growing up in. Potentially there is a question about defining that more closely but it should not necessarily be around exams because I think one of the great benefits for some children of home education is a bit more flexibility around the curriculum and I do not think we would want to take that away.

Q57 **Chair:** Children in school have to do exams and SATs and what you are saying is some children will not do that. Personally I happen to agree there should be changes to exams and much more vocational education—that is a long-term debate about our exam system—but surely it is wrong to say to one group of children, “No, you do not have to do any exams, that is fine, if you do not want to” but everyone else, all the other children who are in school, have to do them. You cannot have one law for one group of children and one law for another.

Councillor Nethsingha: You have to recognise that for some children exams are just not appropriate and that some of the children we are talking about who are being home-educated are children with really quite serious health, mental health or other sorts of disabilities.



Q58 **Chair:** You will have those cases and we should do everything possible to contextualise and help children with mental health problems or special educational needs but I am talking about in the main. It cannot be right; either you have a rule for everyone, which says children in schools can opt out of exams or you have—I cannot understand why you would have two systems.

Jenny Coles: It should be that every child should have an equal opportunity, shouldn't it? That is what we are all striving for. The school system is in place—and that may well change and there are many here that probably hope it might—and there needs to be an equal opportunity for those children who are home-educated to have the same standards and qualifications. How you put that in place is more complex. All children should have access to the same qualifications and career pathways, whether they are home-educated or in school.

Jane Lowe: The thing about home education is that there is a huge diversity of experience and in some cases, children take exams earlier than others because they are excited by certain subjects and are ready to do certain exams. They may go into music exams, for instance. Some children of a practical nature may do other things using functional skills and they may go straight into employment when they are 18 but there is a range of opportunities there and parents do have the opportunity to choose something, which, in consultation with their child, is appropriate for the pathway that they wish to take.

Yes, everybody should have the chance to take exams, if they want to. Parents at home can pursue exams if they wish and they do.

Mrunal Sisodia: I am very wary of making it all about a very narrow criteria of what success looks like for young people. I think one of the big lessons from the SEND world, and particularly the drivers for the behaviours of mainstream schools, is that sometimes that very narrow view of what success looks like can disincentivise inclusion. I would hate to extend that to the home-educated world. The key thing is that what success is like is very different for each young person. We have to recognise that.

That is one of the benefits and advantages of home education. I would be very concerned about diluting that.

Chair: It may be that most children in home education are being educated brilliantly. The problem is that we don't know because there is no data or perhaps a register and we don't know the proper attainment levels. The measures seem to be general guidelines. Maybe that would help so we could find out what the situation is and then make policy after that.

If members do not have any further questions, could I thank all of you for genuinely invaluable evidence? Jane, thank you for the work you do for home educators and your organisation. Lucy, Jenny and Mrunal, thank



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you. Mrunal, it has been good to have you again, because you supported our special educational needs inquiry and you know it is something our Committee cares about very much.

I wish you all well and look forward reading the transcript of your evidence.