



Broadleaf

HOME ED CO-OPERATIVE

Education Select
Committee
February 2025



Contents

	Pg
1 Introduction	3
2 Why do families choose to home educate?	4
3 Who can benefit most from home education?	5
4 What might home education look like?	6
5 Key concerns	7
6 Specific concerns regarding Bill	8
7 Recommendations	12
8 Broadleaf: an example of best practice in home education	13
9 Appendix	19
• Professional testimonials	
• Voices of home educated young people	
• Voices of parents who home educate	

With grateful thanks to all the home educating parents, children and young people who have contributed to this report at such short notice, as well as the professionals who have given their time to support this vital piece of work.

1: Introduction

This document has been prepared over the past four days by a single parent, with help from the community, to provide a snapshot of home education within our family and the community we have built with other parents in the New Forest through Broadleaf.

Our aim is to debunk the myth that home educators are invisible, unsocialised or otherwise unable to function in society; this could not be further from the truth. We also hope that reading the many testimonials in this report demonstrates how important both home education in its current form, and settings like Broadleaf are, for the wellbeing, mental health and education of thousands of young people.

Home education is an integral part of the educational landscape in the UK, and groups such as Broadleaf play a vital role, particularly for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) who are unable to access mainstream schooling. These groups provide essential support - educationally, socially and emotionally - often making a life-changing difference and performing an essential safeguarding role in conjunction with the general public.

While we do not claim to represent the views and experiences of all home educators in the UK, we recognise that our concerns regarding the proposed Bill are widely shared within the home education community. This report additionally compiles the key concerns regarding, and recommendations in response to, the Bill, which can be found in the 'Concerns' and 'Recommendations' sections.

The following report provides an overview of home education including the reasons families choose this path, which groups of children and young people benefit from it, and the potential risks associated with losing the existing support structures, especially for children with SEN. Additionally, the report details the work of our Family Hub at Broadleaf, which has been built entirely through voluntary efforts—without external funding or paid staff—by dedicated parents who have created a safe and supportive space where community and relationships are at the heart of education, and all efforts are centred firmly on the voice and on the wellbeing of the child.

Broadleaf collaborates closely with secondary schools, academic researchers from universities across the Wessex region, including the University of Southampton and the University of Winchester and local authorities. Testimonials from professionals involved in these collaborations are included in the relevant section of this report, demonstrating how groups like Broadleaf are critical in supporting young people in the local region.

In the latter sections, the voices of those most affected by the proposed changes—young people themselves—are presented in line with Article 12 UNCRC. Their perspectives are crucial yet notably absent from the legislative process. Following this, testimonials from parents have been compiled to illustrate the essential role of groups like Broadleaf—not only in supporting the child at the centre but also in supporting the well-being of the entire family.

It is our hope that this document provides the committee with a deeper understanding of why home education is such a vital part of the educational landscape and why the proposed changes would have devastating consequences for thousands of families across the country. These changes not only risk dismantling the essential support structures that enable children—particularly those with Special Educational Needs—to thrive outside the mainstream system, but they would also place an unbearable burden on families who have already sacrificed so much to ensure the well-being and education of their children.

2: Why do families choose to home educate?

My personal experience has been that the reasons a family may choose to home educate are as broad, nuanced and complex as the individuals themselves. Research undertaken by the University of Exeter backs up my personal experience and gives the following range of reasons for a family electing to home educate their child/ren.

- a) Some families came to home education after delaying school starting age, through leaving school, as a lifestyle choice, as a viable alternative to school, or because they were home educated themselves.
- b) Concerns over a lack of Special Educational Needs support in school was a common reason for families deciding to electively home educate. Dissatisfaction with the structure and content of the current education system, particularly in the context of delivering special needs/neurodiversity in the classroom and making appropriate adaptations, played a significant role in decisions to home educate.
- c) Some home education families suggest informal exclusion and 'off-rolling' by schools informed decisions to electively home educate.
- d) Children who had faced bullying in school or been labelled 'behind' as well as gifted learners being held back by age expectations came to home education as a more appropriate form of education for their academic, social and mental health needs.
- e) Many families express disagreement with the 'one-size fits all' school system and prefer the personalised, individualised approach of home education.
- f) The availability of more online resources since the pandemic allow parents and children to provide a continued, broad provision.
- g) Many families view the national curriculum as 'too narrow' and feel they could offer wider and more diverse teaching and learning opportunities through home education.
- h) Most families value the multicultural community aspect of home education and the emphasis on a wide range of interests that were shared through peer social groups organised by home educating families.
- i) Most reported a significant increase in quality of life, freedom of education, individual and family happiness - home education brings families together, strengthens local communities and equips young adults to step into the world with confidence.

3: Who can benefit most from home education?

It is my experience that all children can benefit from home education in practice and, critically, that all children benefit from the option to be home educated. Further, society benefits from home education as it acts as a safety valve for democracy - when the state is failing, the parent is able to step in. Home education further provides an exceptional environment for the following cohorts of children:

- **Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)** – Those for whom mainstream school fails to meet their needs; those with learning difficulties, autism, ADHD, or other additional needs that require a more tailored approach.
- **Children with Mental Health Challenges** – Those experiencing anxiety, depression, school refusal, or trauma, who may find the school environment cannot meet their needs. .
- **Neurodivergent Children** – Including autistic children and those with sensory processing differences, who often thrive in a quieter, flexible, and more personalised setting.
- **Children Who Have Been Bullied** – Those who feel unsafe or unsupported in school and need a more nurturing and confidence-building environment.
- **Gifted and Talented Children** – Those who require a more advanced or specialised curriculum that mainstream schools may not provide.
- **Children with Medical Needs** – Those with chronic illnesses or disabilities who struggle with school attendance and need a more adaptable learning environment.
- **Children from Travelling or Migrant Families** – Such as Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, and Showmen children, or those whose families frequently relocate for work.
- **Children with Religious or Philosophical Differences** – Families who prefer to educate their children in line with their cultural, spiritual, or personal beliefs.
- **Children Who Learn Best Through Alternative Approaches** – Those who thrive with hands-on, experiential, or self-directed learning rather than traditional classroom methods.
- **Children in Temporary or Unstable Situations** – Those experiencing transitions such as foster care placements, family breakdowns, or relocation, who may benefit from educational continuity at home.

4: What might home education look like?

Home education offers a uniquely collaborative and co-created approach to learning, where children and parents work together to identify goals, develop skills, and tailor an education that truly meets the child's individual needs, and home education communities also support the social and emotional needs. This personalised approach ensures that learning is both meaningful and effective, fostering a deep engagement with education.

While home education is particularly beneficial for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or mental health challenges, its bespoke and adaptable nature allows all children to thrive. By meeting each child at their specific developmental stage, home education provides a fully flexible and responsive learning environment.

The diversity of home education manifests in various forms, often drawing upon established pedagogical methods with strong, peer-reviewed evidence bases in the UK and worldwide. Home educators can explore a broad range of educational philosophies, including but not limited to:

- Flexi-Schooling
- Montessori
- Democratic and Self-Directed Education
- Reggio Emilia
- Forest School
- Waldorf Steiner
- Small Schools
- Online Schools
- Worldschooling
- Other Innovators
- Froebel Trust

One of the key advantages of home education is the high adult-child ratio, often 1:1 or 1:2. This close attention ensures progress and success, as families define and measure these according to their values and priorities. Parents, deeply invested in their children's education, are able to provide an enriched learning experience that fosters both academic and personal growth.

For children with SEN, home education offers a nurturing and inclusive environment where their specific needs can be met more effectively. Families have the flexibility to bring in educational providers in ways best suited to the child's age, aptitude, and preferred learning style. This individualised approach means that children receive the support they need in an environment that prioritises their well-being and development.

Home education communities further enhance this experience by offering supportive networks that provide expertise, collaboration, and social engagement. The formal and informal structures within these networks create a sense of belonging and empowerment for both children and parents, reinforcing the restorative power of inclusive education. They also provide an important safeguarding role, as everyone is everybody's responsibility, and it is often friends, family members or neighbours who do reporting if they feel a child is at risk. Therefore, home groups are an essential part of ensuring safeguarding for children outside of school.

Ultimately, home education epitomises an education **for** the child. Parents who choose this path are dedicated to providing rich and broad educational experiences, equipping their children with the skills necessary to navigate an ever-changing world with confidence and capability.

5: Key concerns

1. **Register** - this is not only a register of children's names, but proposes an uncomfortable amount of data being collected with no clear justification for the amount or type of data being collected.
2. **Data collection and privacy** - multi agency data sharing leaves us with concerns over the increased risk of data breaches; there is no clear indication about who will be accessing the data and who will be designated data handlers with training as such.
3. **Burden on families to provide extensive information, potentially every 15 days** - the mandate upon families to provide information to the LA within 15 days of a change simply demonstrates an absolute lack of understanding of Elective Home Education and what this looks like in practice. Families often work alongside visiting experts, museum staff, grandparents, after school clubs and sports groups to provide a broad education for their child; every new outing will incur excessive administration and information sharing with the LA for both families and providers.
4. **Human rights** - rights of the child to be listened to, status, place and location of education have not been considered, and the voices of young people have not been heard.
5. **Alternative Education at Risk** - Drastic changes proposed in this Bill threaten their existence - alternative settings that operate legally and don't meet the requirement to be a school but also do not function like school cannot operate without clear rules on what part time and full time hours are.
6. **Disproportionate impact** on community and parents, especially mothers. We are not a system or a business, but are individual parents making enormous sacrifices for the wellbeing of our children.
7. **Value of Alternative Settings** We need to exist - settings like Broadleaf have had a positive impact on these children's wellbeing and social mobility; we help them overcome or compensate for the systematic disadvantage they would face in a typical school setting. There is also a significant risk of these children becoming NEET as no suitable alternative within current school system exists nor can it exist without significant funding and reform - so why not support what has already been created and is working.
8. **Intrusion into family life** - proposals to enter family homes are intrusive and not safe - you are intruding on private family life not investigating systems and businesses. Family homes are safe places for most children and need to remain that way.
9. **Curriculum Flexibility** National curriculum should not be forced. It is important to retain bespoke education options - there is a significant amount of research currently being done across multiple universities on home education and alternative settings e.g. University of Exeter and University of Southampton who are finding education looks very different from school but is also very successful - because it is very different for school.
10. **Excessive penalties** - Bill proposes a two-tier system where parents who do not ensure attendance at school are fined, while parents who are assessed to not be providing suitable education at home are imprisoned
11. **Parental rights undermined** The Bill is an attack on parental rights - state school is optional and having to gain permission to home educate is very concerning.
12. **Lack of understanding of home education** - Unworkable demand to update every 15 days and goes against valid and flexible approach to education that home education is
13. **Punitive rather than supportive approach** to be placed on providers is worrying - where is the detail to say what will fall into scope, as well as issues data collection logistics.
14. **Lack of understanding** of home education as a valid education philosophy, especially with SEND needs that require flexibility and dynamic responsiveness to changing needs.
15. **Safeguarding and education changes** - neither has any therapeutic or supportive interventions within this Bill, only punitive punishments, fines and prison sentences threatened for failure to comply within unreasonable timescales.

6: Specific concerns regarding Bill - A

There are a number of concerns with the Bill, which are deeply worrying on both a personal level as a long term home educator and on a professional level with the impact on Broadleaf and the community we have built. These particularly lay within the following:

Clause 30 Expanding scope of regulation

"Clause 30, (1A) For the purposes of this Chapter, education is provided at an institution if the institution provides instruction or guidance on any matter (and for this purpose it does not matter whether, or by whom, students attending the institution are supervised)."

Concern over part time hours: Altering the current legal definitions of full-time, part time and 'majority'.

We currently operate legally under 18 hours a week, with some children attending 45 minutes others and attending 9 hours a week, but we are open for optional activities over the course of the week. The threat of changing hours would make running Broadleaf and timetabling activities very hard. As well as making it very stressful for the parents and children to have the uncertainty of possible changing hours, it may also force us to close if we can only remain open if part time is defined as e.g. 6 hours or less. It also conflicts with the Inspection regimes in Clause 31 that are targeted at schools, with the expectation that we would have to adhere to the same criteria for 'standards' but with less hours of contact, as well as produce the same amount of administrative work with no paid or dedicated staff.

Concern over the definition of education: This clause seeks to redefine "education" for independent institutions, without public consultation with education experts.

Generalised Issue:

The proposed definition is far too broad - "instruction or guidance on any matter". Potentially, this could have a detrimental impact on the economic interest of small businesses and voluntary organisations like Broadleaf that provide learning opportunities or support in a diverse way. It would bring us into scope to have to register as a school to be inspected against independent school standards e.g. a broad range of subject disciplines and curriculum or that are at odds with the educational philosophies and practices of flexible part time timetable activities or classes that are child led that make us so successful. Further, we have young people at various stages of their GCSE courses - if this Bill were to become law, we will not be able to continue critical provision for them in preparing for GCSE exams.

Specific issue for Broadleaf:

This would mean we would be reclassified as a school; we would need to close or need to function like a school. If the hours considered part time are reduced, and we also have to have a broad and balanced curriculum, it would not match the way we currently support children and young people and parents and is at odds with what makes us successful supporting home educated young people. What we offer is currently supplementary to the full time education provided by parents, and we exist simply to enrich the learning experience for young people, support the development of skills and help prepare young people, alongside their families, for their chosen future pathways.

Specific concerns regarding Bill - A cont.

Delegated Powers document, page 32, section 157

..."such as institutions providing education wholly or partly online, providing teaching by tutors both at home and at premises owned by a third party, or different arrangements for "home-education" that are beyond parents simply educating their own children at home. For example, by setting up home education clubs with different sets of parents sharing responsibility for educating their children collectively."

This is the breaking up of the very core of home ed - community building - and is based on a misunderstanding what of home education actually; the 'home in home education is something of a misnomer - home education is often done out in the community in groups and public spaces, in museums, parks and village halls. This is known as "Communities of practice". Communities of practise in home education is documented in published research from a variety of universities including, Univeristy of Exeter, Bath univeristy, Open university, Liverpool Hope University, Derby University and more.

On reading the delegated powers document it appears that wonderful settings like Broadleaf cannot exist; it doesn't seem to have been taken into account that these settings both complement home education AND provide the safeguarding oversight by members of the community and the general public that the government appear to want for home educated children. Broadleaf thrives as a community; at its very core is the coming together of passionate, dedicated parents, bringing their skills and experience to enrich the educational experiences of their children.

Concern:

This clause proposes providers be inspected when they are brought into scope by new time regulations against the Independent School Standards.

"173. The second amendment will put beyond doubt that standards can be made requiring proprietors to have regard to other guidance, and documents published, by the Secretary of State (from time to time)..."

Specific concerns regarding Bill - B

3. Clause - 31 Independent educational institution standards

Issue: By focusing on a narrow set of subjects this is potentially disregarding alternative, research-supported educational styles practiced globally e.g. Montessori, Steiner, Emilia Regio, Charlotte Mason, Freobel, or other democratic, child led or self directed approaches. In effect, settings that are currently not full time will either have to become school-like, or risk being deregistered or prosecuted. The emphasis on a limited curriculum will undermine the legitimacy of alternative education methods, such as Montessori or Waldorf, which prioritise holistic development. This could lead to a homogenisation of education and diminish parental choice in selecting suitable educational approaches for their children.

This will limit educational diversity and parental choice, negatively affecting institutions that offer alternative education models. It will also have a huge impact on providers that act during the day for home educators, but also after school for other children. Many small businesses operate in this way to stay financially afloat, they rely on daytime income so this also threatens the opportunities for schooled children.

Delegated Powers

172. The first amendment is an extension of the existing power to make provision about the suitability of proprietors (see section 94(1)(d)). In particular, it allows for a discretion to be conferred on the Secretary of State to decide whether someone is fit and proper to participate in the management of an independent educational institution.

“173. The second amendment will put beyond doubt that standards can be made requiring proprietors to have regard to other guidance, and documents published, by the Secretary of State (from time to time).”

Specific concerns regarding Bill - C

Clause 36: Powers of Entry and Investigation

Concern: This clause grants authorities the power to enter educational premises, including home education settings, without a warrant, and provides constable-like powers to designated officials.

Issue: Warrantless entry into private educational settings raises significant privacy concerns and may be viewed as governmental overreach into family life. It could deter parents from choosing home education due to fears of unwarranted intrusion. Further, for children with SEN, the idea of their safe haven - home - being open to entry from professionals could be deeply concerning and cause emotional distress and harm.

While the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill aims to enhance child protection through improved data sharing, it is imperative to address the privacy, security, and civil liberties concerns that led to the discontinuation of the previous attempt of a children's database: ContactPoint. A database that was trialed in 2009 costing 241 million to set up and a further estimated 41-81 million to run each year, with an estimated 330,000 users. Time to do due diligence and consultation with stakeholders to ensure learning from past experiences will be vital in ensuring the new measures are both effective and respectful of individual rights.

Comparative Considerations for MPs:

- **Privacy and Security:** Similar to the concerns raised during the ContactPoint initiative, the collection and sharing of extensive personal data under the new bill may lead to privacy and security issues. Ensuring robust data protection measures will be crucial to prevent unauthorised access and misuse.
- **Governmental Overreach:** The introduction of unique identifiers and increased data sharing could be perceived as governmental overreach into family life, echoing past criticisms of ContactPoint. Balancing child protection with respect for family autonomy and civil liberties will be essential.
- **Implementation Challenges:** The practical challenges that contributed to ContactPoint's discontinuation, such as data accuracy, user access control, and system security, should be carefully evaluated to avoid similar pitfalls.

Recommendation: omit the clauses above from this Bill and have a separate consultation with key stakeholders, look at best practices across the sector and conduct an impact assessment on future proposed changes.

7: Recommendations

- Role of the EHE Officer at the Local Authority should require training in alternative education methods, with support from a SENCO and an Educational Psychologist, all developed in collaboration with experienced home educators, and academic researchers in home education who have lived experience.
- There should be a clear, accessible and independent appeals process for families in instances where the local authority has acted inappropriately or incorrectly. This process should be free at the point of access.
- The requirement in this Bill for local authorities to provide support to home educators would be a valuable addition if access to exam centres, Educational Psychologists and qualified SENCOs and other professionals were included.

8: Broadleaf; an example of best practice in home education communities

Since 2010, Broadleaf has profoundly impacted the lives of hundreds of families and young people who have attended our Family Hub in the heart of the New Forest. Our organisation serves as a vital lifeline for children, teens, and parents navigating the challenges of education outside the mainstream education system.

School is not the right setting for every child, particularly those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and other complex needs, whose requirements are not met in either mainstream or special school streams - Broadleaf fills this gap in provision.

Broadleaf exists in this space between the two, offering high-quality educational provision alongside a relationship-focused environment that provides intensive support in a nurturing, respectful, and consent-based setting.



Broadleaf is run entirely by volunteer parents - for our own children and others - as we receive no statutory funding to support what we offer to Local Authorities, Schools and families. This sense of community strength, diversity and kindness has always been the central ethos of Home Education and Broadleaf strives to uphold this tenet firm.

Our core principle of inclusivity for all families - ensuring nobody who needs us is turned away through lack of finance - means we cannot charge enough to cover our time and expertise AND hold on to our ethos of accessibility - hence our incredible small team of volunteers make this all happen for the sake of our community and the children we serve.

Successfully meeting diverse needs

Our Family Hub has provided a haven for families whose children face barriers in traditional educational settings. We provide a safe, supportive environment that fosters hope and offers expert guidance in home education for both parents and children.

Local Authorities and secondary schools in our area are increasingly turning to us to offer placements to children who are unable to access any of the other settings in our area, knowing that children with diverse and complex needs thrive in our care.

On a recent visit to Broadleaf, a Headteacher carrying out safeguarding checks from was so blown away by what we do on that he told us he was heading home to tell their spouse that he would be leaving mainstream education and coming to work for us instead!

David, Deputy Head of a mainstream Secondary school in Hampshire said:

"Broadleaf offers a lifeline to children who struggle to access mainstream education, providing a nurturing and professional environment where they can thrive. By tailoring their approach to meet individual needs, Broadleaf ensures that every child has a chance to succeed educationally, regardless of the challenges they face.

Beyond academics, I saw first hand when visiting how they support the building of vital social skills, fostering confidence, and promoting positive interactions, preparing students for future success.

With a safe and supportive setting, Broadleaf creates opportunities for personal growth and development, helping children reach their full potential while feeling valued and understood. I was very happy and confident in the impact Broadleaf staff (volunteers) were having on our student at the time and would be more than happy to recommend them."



Holistic enrichment activities

Our programmes are diverse and dynamic, designed to cater to the varied interests and needs of children and teens. Weekly activities included developing our four Hubs of provision. These offered a wide variety of activities including:

Project Hub

- **Wellbeing Groups** These ongoing group sessions help young people develop social skills, explore wellbeing techniques, and build confidence in a supportive long-term group setting where every voice matters. Children and young people have agency alongside adults who model authenticity of expression and emotional regulation.

Study Hub

- **Specialist GCSE Study groups** Providing a variety of small group classes and 1-1 support enables learners to build confidence in their skills at their own pace.
- **Academic Support** tailored, gentle consent-based and engaging small groups for maximum impact.

Creative Hub

- **Dance Classes** More than 20 children found joy, movement, and confidence each week on the dance floor.
- **Art Clubs** Creativity flourished for 20 children each week in art-focused sessions.
- **Music classes** working with Hampshire Music Service, we deliver music classes to over 40 children each week who wouldn't otherwise have had access to this enriching experience.

Parent Hub

- **Parent Groups** We offered a large number of 1-1 and group parent support sessions, exam workshops, community-building and HE information sessions; essential for families who are often in crisis when they reach our services.

Extras

- **Out of School Prom** We curated a Prom for over 145 children and young people to celebrate the year.
- **Gardening Club** An allotment project engaged children in planting and nurturing flowers, berries, and vegetables, teaching them practical skills and sustainable practices.



Neurodivergent-led, transformative programmes



As a neurodivergent-led organisation, we bring expertise, compassion, and lived experience to everything we offer. Approximately 80% of the 120 children and young people in the Broadleaf family are neurodivergent, placing us in a unique position to deeply understand their needs and provide tailored support that aligns with their aspirations.

We have worked tirelessly to offer an array of enriching activities that support not just academic learning but also social, emotional, and personal growth. From weekly social support meets to specialised clubs, Broadleaf has created a vibrant ecosystem of opportunity, empowerment, and community.

Broadleaf is an essential thread in the tapestry of educational provision in the UK - filling the gulf between mainstream and special schools - supporting children with SEN to thrive.

Exciting opportunities

Unique Opportunities

Broadleaf's partnerships and projects have unlocked extraordinary experiences for the children we support, enriching educational, social and life journeys.

Our collaborations in the past 12 months include working alongside the University of Southampton, University of Winchester, the South Bank Centre, Turner Sims Theatre, Countryside Education Trust, the National Trust, Culture in Common, BBC Gardeners' World and the New Forest National Park Authority.

Collaborations

Working with the South Bank Centre and Turner Sims Theatre led to a novel-writing project that empowered young voices.

Woodland songwriting workshops culminated in performances and wonderful music based on the beauty of the New Forest reaching many other people.

Design and build of an award-winning show garden at the BBC Gardener's World Show. Our young people were involved from conception to build of the garden, and were rewarded with a prestigious Gold award, reflecting the children's hard work and pride in their achievements.

These opportunities fostered a sense of accomplishment and inspired aspirations, as well as highlighted the successes of home educated children locally - BBC Radio interviewed them live!



Building community, strength and resilience

Creating lasting impact

Families frequently share how Broadleaf has been a cornerstone of stability, growth, and hope. Parents express gratitude for a space that not only understands their children's challenges but also celebrates their potential.

The skills, confidence, and friendships cultivated here extend beyond the walls of our Hub, creating ripples of positive change in their lives.

Broadleaf's work over the past 15 years demonstrates the power of community and compassion in transforming educational and personal journeys. By meeting families where they are and offering them a pathway forward, we have made an enduring difference in the lives of those we serve.



Professionals say:

Statement from Professor Sarah Parsons and Professor Hanna Kovshoff, Autism Community Research Network @Southampton (ACoRNS), University of Southampton

29 th January 2025

S.J.Parsons@soton.ac.uk H.Kovshoff@soton.ac.uk

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/research/institutes-centres/autism-community-research-network-southampton>

Clare Canning is a Visiting Academic and collaborator with the Autism Community Research Network @Southampton (ACoRNS) which is co-directed by Sarah Parsons (Professor of Autism and Inclusion, Education) and Hanna Kovshoff (Professor of Neurodiversity, Psychology) at the University of Southampton. ACoRNS is a unique academic centre for autism research dedicated to enhancing the educational experiences of autistic children and young people by hearing from young people and families directly.

Together we recognise that home-education is not a first choice for many families, but many feel compelled to follow this option because of difficult experiences that young people, especially those with SEND, report in school 1 , 2 . Therefore, home-education remains an important and valid option for some who may have struggled for several years to try to keep their children in school. We know from survey data that neurodivergent young people are overrepresented amongst those experiencing difficulties with school attendance 3 , 4 . Home-education in general, and initiatives like Broadleaf in particular, provide a lifeline for many families to enable young people to rebuild a positive relationship with teaching and learning. Whilst safeguarding must always remain a priority for all children, it is important that elective home education should not be conflated with children missing from school or otherwise at risk. We recognise that there is potential overlap between these two groups, but there is little evidence at present to support the need for stringent controls on elective home education families and groups that goes beyond the duties of other communities and organisations providing activities for children outside of school.

There is also little contextual evidence from the UK on outcomes for children who have been home educated and, therefore, no evidence to support a belief that outcomes for home-educated young people are negative or worse than children who attend schools. Importantly, there is a significant lack of evidence about how home education is practiced and experienced by home educated children and their families. Given this lack of evidence, we are currently collaborating on research with Broadleaf to begin to inform our understanding of organisations that support families to home educate. One of our PhD students (independent from Broadleaf) will explore the experiences of young people who are being home educated, and their families. We also are planning a research grant submission to the ESRC to investigate home education experiences further which, if funded, will include a survey and interviews completed by families across the country. Given the burden on families, and on public resources, it is vital to understand more about these lived experiences to inform policy decisions. For many families, home-education provides a supportive community that enables young people to progress, rather than a punitive, unsafe or threatening environment. For many families still, schools are unsafe contexts for learning, and home education is now practiced as a safer alternative for their children's well-being.

1 Parsons, S., & Lewis, A. (2010). *The home-education of children with special needs or disabilities in the UK: views of parents from an online survey*. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(1), 67-86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802504135>

2 Smith, E., & Nelson, J. (2015). *Using the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey to examine the prevalence and characteristics of families who home educate in the UK*. *Educational Studies*, 41(3), 312-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2015.1005577>

3 Connolly, S. E., Constable, H. L., & Mullally, S. L. (2023). *School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1237052. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1237052/full>

4 Totsika, V., Hastings, R. P., Dutton, Y., Worsley, A., Melvin, G., Gray, K., ... & Heyne, D. (2020). *Types and correlates of school non-attendance in students with autism spectrum disorders*. *Autism*, 24(7), 1639-1649. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1362361320916967>

Professionals say:

Statement from Clair James, Doctoral Student, University of Winchester:

"As an educator for over 20 years, a philosophy of education PhD research student, as well as a mother involved in home education and flexi schooling for 28 years, I feel well qualified to say that provisions such as Broadleaf literally save lives.

I have seen first hand the trauma suffered by children for whom a CAMHS assessment waiting list, let alone the support needed from it, is out of reach within their school career window. I have seen many family's lives turned around by the ability to own their own experience of education. I have seen children who have caused huge amounts of damage to both themselves and to property, transformed into smiling, excited and curious beings.

Broadleaf and other settings like it offer a provision that is only going to be more greatly needed given the current funding situation for special educational provision. It would simply be ludicrous to lose these special places."

Statement from D.J., Deputy Head of large Secondary School in Hampshire:

"Broadleaf offers a lifeline to children who struggle to access mainstream education, providing a nurturing and professional environment where they can thrive. By tailoring their approach to meet individual needs, Broadleaf ensures that every child has a chance to succeed educationally, regardless of the challenges they face.

Beyond academics, I saw first hand when visiting how they support the building of vital social skills, fostering confidence, and promoting positive interactions, preparing students for future success.

With a safe and supportive setting, Broadleaf creates opportunities for personal growth and development, helping children reach their full potential while feeling valued and understood. I was very happy and confident in the impact Broadleaf staff (volunteers) were having on our Testwood student at the time and would be more than happy to recommend them."

Young people say:

Ellie, aged 11, said:

"It's important to have a space where I can make friends and meet up with them. It's also nice just being there and relaxing and feeling at home. It's a nice and chilled session, the lessons start easy and it gradually gets harder and harder but in an easy way. Everyone is friendly and kind and that's really important to me so I feel more confident."

Sam, aged 13, said:

"I haven't been at Broadleaf very long but it's been great for me. Broadleaf has a great sense of community and it's a really good place to learn with loads of potential. I like that it's very clean and the people putting the time into running it and helping out are very nice. Everyone is really helpful and kind. It's a nice place to be."

Hannah, aged 15, said:

"Broadleaf means so much to me and it has helped me through so much. I began home-ed in 2023 and Broadleaf was the first place I discovered and I have loved it ever since. I immediately felt welcome and safe from day one and that continues to this day. I have made friends for life, encountered amazing people and enjoyed the most incredible experiences. Every session introduces something new and all topics are delivered in an exciting fashion."

I call Broadleaf my safe space - I feel valued, I feel secure and I feel like I am listened to as well. We all contribute and I love that our comments are always welcomed by the adults. Conversely, if I want to sit and be quiet then that is respected which is something I never felt at school.

Broadleaf brings out the best version of us and my friendships formed are strong and genuine without pressure to conform; we are all respected and respect each other as individuals.

Clare is so supportive, I have flourished at Broadleaf in a way that I never thought possible when I was at school and it is due to the teaching style - I felt "told" at school, very much "do as I say" whereas home-ed very much encourages mutual input and points of view.

I am inspired by Clare and her approach to education, it has led me towards investigating a similar career for myself as I see the difference she makes to those of us who might not fit into the typical education system."

Young people say:

Leona, aged 11, said:

"Broadleaf is amazing and has helped me progress in my learning so much and it's also a really lovely community and everyone there is really nice and kind."

Leo, aged 13, said:

"I feel so much happier going to Broadleaf to learn. It is a much nicer atmosphere and I have learnt so much more than I did on school. The adults are super nice and everyone has a smile on their face most of the time, unlike at school where adults were usually annoyed and the children unhappy."

Emmie, aged 14, said:

"I have always struggled in main stream schools with teachers and making friends, so we decided that I would be home educated and the first place I visited was Broadleaf. On my first day there I was so nervous but when I met Clare and the other students they made me feel so welcome . Ever since I started Broadleaf I have never felt so safe and happy at any type of school until now .

Clare Canning is the definition of a fantastic listener, a great teacher and she motivates students to achieve more and pursue their interests. Without broadleaf I never would have met such great people who are now my dearest friends and role models who I look up to every day. Broadleaf isn't just friends and teachers it's a Family .

Alex, aged 9, said:

"It makes me feel happy and comforted. All the people there are really fun. Being able to have fun and play which I didn't at school. There's lots of time to do what I want to do."

Rosie, aged 5, said:

"I enjoy the games and I love all the people there."

Lily, aged 7, said:

"So many people come so if we didn't have that place everyone couldn't meet up and have f

Parents say:

"I do not know what we would have done if we hadn't found you. You know that you are the central reason he has been able to pick up his life and move forward again." Mum to S, aged 11

"The opportunities you bring to Broadleaf are wonderful. I don't know how you find all of these things and then actually manifest them - you clearly have creative magic dust oozing from your being." Mum to B, aged 14



"D and I are feel very lucky to have met you and the group. I don't think you realise the impact you have on not just the young person, but their entire family. The work you do has tranformed all of our lives for the better - it ripples out from the amazing space you create." Mum to D, aged 15

"You are an angel! I had been hoping something like this might exist. Thank you so much for giving me hope." Mum to T, aged 16

"You made E able to believe in himself again. You have given us our joyous boy back and I can never thank you enough for everything you have done for his self esteem." Mum to E aged 12

"From my perspective it is an important place because it has enabled me to find a truly inclusive place that understand how children are all different and treat kids as important people. It creates a safe place for everyone."

Parents say:

"Broadleaf has been the year that R needed. He is now back in school, but without you, there is no way we could have got to this place. Our whole family are beyond grateful for what you did for him. You totally changed his life for the better and gave him a future back." Mum to R, aged 13

"I had to give you a hug as even though we haven't met before today, your support and kindness at such a difficult time has been the most valuable thing. Thank you for welcoming us and helping us believe in kindness again." Mum to G

"Thank you so much for all you do. Our home ed journey has been totally transformed by the things you offer." Mum to K, aged 15



"H hasn't been able to stay anywhere else - either he can't settle, or the facilitators are not able to support him in their settings. We will do everything to keep him here with you, because we felt emotional when we saw him engaging with projects and other children. It's been almost impossible previously." Mum to H, aged 11

"R had a really difficult time at school and and your care and kindness has been just what we both needed! She is loving Broadleaf!" Mum to R, aged 15

"I've felt like a weight lifted this week since finding you. You're so kind, I have felt very alone with this until now." Mum to L, aged 14

"This last year was a turning point for us. I remember sitting on the bench out in the Bramshaw garden not holding it together at all. You all have been so lovely and supportive and I'm so glad we found you, and finding the other tutors who are also lovely and helpful. I think now we are on our way.....finally." Mum to Y, aged 15

Parents say:

Carole, Mum to Ella, aged 12:

'We send our daughter to Broadleaf as she is unable to cope with mainstream school. She has always struggled with nursery and school, there have been periods of low attendance and high anxiety, her mental health was significantly affected. She has sensory, social and emotional issues, likely due to ASD, we are having an assessment to confirm. These issues have made school challenging and really uncomfortable for her for years.

Teachers ignored our concerns and the training on neurodiversity profiles for girls very much lacking. Our daughter and us as a family were let down. She is now at secondary school and the very busy loud environment with hundreds of people and continuous transitions are frightening and stressful for her and she is not currently attending, the SENCO team have been supportive and can see that mainstream education is not appropriate for her.

We have a full week of work and activities to keep her up to date with school work however the social side was lacking and we were concerned that she was becoming isolated and lonely, because although she is not keen on large groups of people she is very sociable and really loves having friends and playing, as long as it is one to one or in small familiar groups.

So I began looking at other provisions that might be good, that is when I learnt about Broadleaf, we went to look around and meet the team. They are all so warm and welcoming and managed to put our daughter at ease quickly and she agreed to go and join in. She has been going for some time now and she has made friends and is enjoying attending and actually gets excited to go in and learn and play and engage with peers and staff.

The team really support her and respect her individual needs. I am so pleased to have got her a place and to watch my daughter grow in confidence be her authentic self and form friendships is just amazing. It has really been such a support for us and for many others in our community."

Parents say:

Anna, Mum of 14 year old Lucy, says:

"Testimonial for Broadleaf – A Beacon of Support and Innovation in Education

I am writing to highlight the transformative impact of Broadleaf, led by the exceptional Clare Canning. Our family has faced an incredibly challenging year, and throughout this period, ensuring the mental and emotional wellbeing of our child has been paramount. Broadleaf has played a crucial role in supporting this objective, offering a unique educational environment that has been instrumental in navigating these difficult circumstances.

Clare Canning is a pillar of unwavering support, strength, and care. Her dedication goes far beyond the typical duties you would find in a school setting—she has created a safe, nurturing, and responsive space that provides continuity for children during times of disruption. In a world where standard educational systems often struggle to accommodate the diverse needs of individual students, Broadleaf stands out as a place that understands and respects each child's unique learning style, emotional needs, and life circumstances.

Broadleaf offers a truly consent-based approach to education—an approach that respects the autonomy of students and fosters a sense of agency in their learning. Unlike conventional educational settings, which may place undue pressure on children to conform to rigid structures, Broadleaf prioritises inclusion and individualised support. This philosophy ensures that children can engage with learning on their own terms, without the anxiety or discomfort that often arises from forced participation in activities they do not feel ready for.

The diversity of learning opportunities provided at Broadleaf is vast, allowing children to explore a wide range of subjects in an enjoyable and engaging manner. Beyond academic achievement, Broadleaf also offers a supportive environment where children can build meaningful friendships and develop social skills in a natural, unforced way. This has been invaluable for our child, helping to foster a sense of community and belonging, even during times of uncertainty.

Without the opportunity for home education and the support of Broadleaf, I firmly believe that our child would be facing significant emotional and psychological challenges today. The holistic, child-centered approach that Clare has implemented at Broadleaf has been essential in safeguarding our child's wellbeing and enabling her to thrive in a difficult year.

Broadleaf is a model of what education can—and should—be: an inclusive, compassionate environment where every child's individual needs are met. It is essential that such innovative and compassionate educational settings are supported, recognised, and given the opportunity to thrive, as they offer invaluable alternatives to the traditional schooling system."

Parents say:

Anna, Mum to Leo, aged 13:

“My son was withdrawn and anxious, not sleeping and desperately unhappy at school. After months of trying to work with the school on various strategies, we decided to deregister him as we were concerned about his mental health and lack of progress. A teacher suggested it would be ideal for him!

It took a few months for my son to realise he could feel safe and trust adults again, and attending Broadleaf has accelerated his progress in learning and socially. He is now willing to try new things and when he meets new people he is confident and will speak to them.

He is the child he always was again, having lost his spark and enthusiasm for learning as a result of the school environment and constant punishments and criticisms he received for minor issues such as forgetting a pen, or being late to a lesson after PE.”



Parents say:

David and Emma, Mum to Leah, aged 15:

"We considered home-ed for quite some period of time before withdrawing our daughter from school and we wish we had taken the leap of faith earlier.

Even in an independent school the curriculum was restrictive and prescriptive with a one size fits all approach and that simply does not work - Our children are all unique and should be treated as such. The war poems of Owen and Brooke may be useful to some but in a world where we are continually told that our country needs more entrepreneurial skills then some of the left-field thinkers deserve to be listened to.

Home-ed groups also foster positive relationships - no one is singled out, as they can be in schools, for being different but rather their unique approaches are encouraged and nurtured and the results are there for all to see - Home-ed children are well-rounded, well mannered and mentally and emotionally mature with developed conversational skills because they are treated as equals by the staff who promote really positive two way communication.

The parents of children in home-ed are not simply rebelling against the system; they are genuinely seeking the best for their children in an environment that promotes equality and free thinking - The national curriculum and education boards would do well to talk to professionals within home-ed and maybe then they might understand why the vast majority of children educated outside of school are doing so well in their chosen exams.

Children need to be encouraged, rewarded and recognised and they will achieve more under that kind of leadership and that, I believe, is what safe havens like Broadleaf offer; a unique, supportive and safe environment for our leaders of the future."



Parents say:

Callie, Mum to Sophie, aged 11:

"As a home educating mum my daughter now 12 years old has always been home educated. As she reached secondary school age we felt it was more important to find some relaxed yet structured learning with others in a group environment.

My daughter is a happy young lady with lots of friends and attends different groups and socials, but Broadleaf community offers something extra special. They offer structured learning in group environment that is nourishing and encouraging. I noticed each week when my daughter came out that she was really happy and empowered in her academic abilities.

I can see that Broadleaf is such a nurturing and supporting environment that empowers children to develop their skills and learning in a relaxed and welcoming setting. They are surrounded by nature where the children can enjoy breaks from their lessons outside in their community garden and surrounded by the beautiful forest.

Thank you, Clare and the team. As a mother knowing that you have other courses coming up for help with GCSEs you really are such a lifeline for myself and my daughter especially over the next few years."

Sarah, Mum to Livvie, aged 14:

"Our daughter left mainstream education unexpectedly after experiencing several traumatic incidences. This had an extremely negative impact on her wellbeing. She felt unsafe, vulnerable and she was unable to trust others. This had a huge impact on our family. We wanted our daughter to continue learning but our priority had to be her safety and wellbeing.

We had no experience of being in a situation such as this and there appeared to be no support in finding a way to move forwards. Our daughter and family were not in a good place. Then we found Broadleaf.

From the first point of contact Broadleaf offered us bespoke support to help our daughter and family move forwards. They provided the safe, nurturing environment that she needed. They supported her to regain trust in others and build strong friendships with peers. This had a huge impact on her confidence which improved greatly. It was amazing to watch the transformation.

Broadleaf is integral to our daughter's life. She loves attending the fun, exciting, creative and educational sessions. It has provided the foundations for her to develop into a confident and happy young person with a positive outlook on the future. She is now keen to access learning and is currently studying GCSE courses.

It is difficult to think about where our daughter and family would be without Broadleaf and the unique and bespoke support it provides for young people and their families. We are so grateful to them for everything they have done for our daughter and family."

Parents say:

Dave, Dad to Jake, aged 11:

"To me Broadleaf is a safe haven community for home educated children and their parents. The community upholds key ideas and values that shape it and have such an impact for the children who are a part of it, such as: accepting, welcoming, and meeting children as they are. Building trust over time. Prioritising a sense of safety and security by meeting needs first.

Acknowledging that being in an environment where they feel safe, secure, and have their needs met creates the best conditions for learning. Self esteem and resilience is fostered most effectively by nurturing a sense of security and belonging as part of a reliable community, rather than by exposure to stress or "off the deep end" approaches.

My eldest child attends Broadleaf twice a week and since he joined, more than a year ago, his confidence has soared. He was too anxious to be left at any drop-off meetings when he started Broadleaf - now he is happily dropped off for the 3 hour sessions - his anxiety has absolutely improved as a direct result of being part of Broadleaf.

He has a positive experience at Broadleaf every single time he attends, he comments that he had a great time and shares his favourite moments with us. He is always pleased when it's a Broadleaf day and is excited to see his friends. He knew no one when he started and now feels that the whole group are his good friends. His relationships with his friends outside of Broadleaf have improved since he joined as well.

The culture of respect and tolerance for others and their needs at Broadleaf has made him a stronger advocate for his own needs in other friendship dynamics. When previously he was often overwhelmed when playing with friends and needed support, now he can manage his own reactions more, calmly, and express his needs to his peers without external support.

As a whole family we absolutely benefit from Broadleaf. Seeing our eldest child thriving and growing in confidence makes us happy of course, and we also benefit from adult to adult peer support at the drop in sessions. I have directly benefitted from brilliant support and advice from other parents in times of need and the regular contact with community of parents with shared goals makes me feel motivated and supported as we work together as a team for our kids.

I feel that Broadleaf is the only provision in my area that can provide the community and ethos that have made such brilliant outcomes for my child and my whole family. The child-focused and consent-based approach they use has been invaluable for my child's development, and to have such a community that meets his needs so brilliantly has a huge positive impact on our whole family. I feel that preserving Broadleaf and other settings like it, in their current form, is absolutely vital."

Parents say:

Richard, Dad to Mia, aged 14:

"Our experience with Broadleaf Home Education Cooperative was preceded by the darkest period in my life as a parent. For around 6 months my daughter was bullied at school. It started slowly and subtly with her being humiliated in assemblies and classrooms, proceeded to her being lied about online and ended with her being surrounded by large groups of girls in the corridors, threatening her with violence on an almost daily basis. It was at this stage that my wife and I made the decision to take our daughter out of school. As parents we could no longer justify sending our child to a place where we believed her physical safety and mental well-being were at risk.

The first few months of home education were very tough. We had a once vital and socially confident 12 year-old, who was now emotionally decimated by the loss of her best friends, her school life, and her education. After some research we found a home education cooperative called Broadleaf and went along for a trial morning. Within 20 minutes my daughter had been taken into the fold by a smiling and friendly group of girls her own age. She went with them into a GCSE Business class and 50 minutes later came out smiling.

Since then, along with many ups and downs, our daughter has gone from strength to strength. Her confidence in herself has grown, her humour and vitality have returned and her interest in Business Studies, English and History (among the many subjects taught there) has grown beyond our expectations. Furthermore, she has found friends again – a direct result of the nurturing and friendly environment created by the teachers. Above everything else this has had the biggest impact on her well-being and mental health.

I cannot speak about other home education cooperatives but if they are in any way like Broadleaf they are run by extremely dedicated and selfless people who care deeply for the welfare, safety and education of children. The intimacy and community offered in this environment is extraordinary and is something that, I would argue, is impossible to achieve in a secondary school populated by 1000+ students. Such a place couldn't come close to offering the individualised teaching, and sense of community and safety that Broadleaf offers.

Speaking from my head I see it as a necessary adjunct to the current mainstream education system, offering a sanctuary for students who struggle with anxiety or depression, who are on the autism spectrum, who suffer from social isolation or who have been bullied. Speaking from my heart, it is a place that gave our family hope, happiness and opportunities where the mainstream education system failed miserably.

As a father of someone who is home educated and who is only thriving because of home education, I would say this: if the governments concern is the protection of children, then it might be wise to look at those students who, like my daughter, are overlooked or ignored by the very people and institutions who should, and who claim, to offer protection. . Home Education offers such students a way out and opens up a wealth of possibilities.

I urge you to support, rather than marginalise, home education, in all its forms. I understand that the government's aim is to protect children, and that is of course understandable and admirable, but I would argue that without home education, paradoxically, an increasing number of children will in fact be put at risk from physical and emotional violence and will be denied the protection that is