

Written evidence submitted by [a member of the public]
[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

Home Education Committee Submission for Evidence

[name], 2 Nov 2020

I am a long term home educator, with four children currently aged [ages], who have never been to school. I organise [personal information] about home education, and am active in various [support groups], which has brought me into contact with many other home educators over a long period of time. This has informed my views but all opinions expressed are my own.

We have always viewed home education as a positive choice, as have the majority of families we have come across, some of whom have used schools at times and others who have never done so. The key benefit we have aimed for is the ability of our children to have a much greater level of autonomy over their education and lives than would be the case were they at school. Alongside this we have experienced many other benefits such as a strong family culture, flexibility to fit our schedule to our family's needs, a wider range of interaction in the local community, and happy, self-motivated children with a wide range of interests, who have developed their own individual set of skills.

Our approach involved no formal teaching, 'schoolwork', or lessons, until my elder children were around [age] or [age], instead opting for learning through play within an environment geared towards creativity and social contact (during this time the older children learnt to read and write, and picked up skills required to score highly in sample 11+ papers, with no formal school-like activities required). As the children got older, we introduced a limited amount of structured learning, including online classes, aimed at extending knowledge in particular areas of interest and gaining the GCSEs/IGCSEs required for their next steps (currently we expect the children to complete A-levels at a local sixth form). My eldest was supposed to take her first GCSE this summer, which will now hopefully take place in November.

We have never had Local Authority involvement, nor do I believe it would have offered any benefit, given what is currently available. Whilst some EHE officers do appear to have a good understanding of the variety of approaches to home education, many others expect to see an environment much like school. At best this leads to a slightly stressful waste of everyone's time. It may also undermine an approach built around intrinsic motivation by introducing external judgements and comparing with a school based standard. At worst, for children who have had traumatic experiences in school, it can be highly damaging. While safeguarding of children is important, I firmly believe that it occurs best within a community that is primed to look out for the welfare of all, and within a relationship with authority where others can raise issues and believe they will be handled appropriately. Mandatory periodic inspection - particularly within the home - is more likely to erode that trust than it is to provide any significant benefits; the number of children who are abused

while attending school - sometimes even at the school - without being detected shows the limits of a cursory inspection. Better to build positive relationships by offering - not requiring - genuinely valuable support, having a clear pathway for issues to be raised, and handling those issues sensitively (which should already be happening, but in many cases isn't).

The key issue that we face, and that I see amongst other home educators, is lack of access to local, affordable and reliable exam centres where we can sit GCSE and (importantly) IGCSE exams. While we are extremely grateful that there is a local school (only an hour's drive away in a neighbouring county, which counts as close by in this context) that offers this facility when it can, and only passes on costs, the fact that this is an 'optional extra' means that the school's pupils take priority and private candidates cannot rely on it being an option. Other schools within the area that have sometimes allowed private candidates are even less reliable, and many local options have stopped taking candidates in recent years. It takes a lot of ringing round and uncertainty to even find out what is an option. In order to get a reliable centre, we need to use a private centre which is significantly more expensive (eg £170 instead of £60 for a standard 2 paper exam), and requires 2-3 hours driving to get to. This means that morning exams also require an overnight hotel stay, adding to the expense and difficulty, especially when you have multiple children. We are fortunate that this is an option for us, but it is prohibitive to many.

This issue has got worse with the recent response to COVID-19. The decision to cancel exams left the majority of home educators unable to get grades this summer (including my daughter). For us this was a stressful inconvenience that required changing up future plans; for some it has meant the loss of college places and severe anxiety as the goalposts constantly shifted. It has also led to many centres withdrawing support for private candidates, either temporarily, as they are uncertain of what arrangements may be in place next summer and just don't want to make any commitments, or permanently as they decide that private candidates simply aren't worth the hassle.

The single biggest change I would like to see is a government mandated requirement to offer private candidates access to centres to sit all standard exams, including GCSE, IGCSE and A level. This could be limited to exams with no or very straightforward NEA elements (the majority of home educators choose IGCSEs for this reason). It need not include funding, though the ideal would be for only exam costs to be passed on (which may require government subsidies to cover, eg additional costs for access arrangements where these are required, to ensure more of a level playing field between children with SEND and those without). This could either be a requirement for each local authority to provide such a centre (ideally more than one to ensure a reasonable travel time across large authorities) or possibly on the awarding bodies for centres to allow private candidates as a condition of exam board registration. This requirement would help not only home educators, but also adult learners and schooled children who wish to access exams not offered directly by their schools.

Another area where home educators have been affected by the Covid-19 response is social contact. Whilst this is often considered a downside to home educating, the reality is that most home educators choose to offer their children a vibrant and wide ranging social life

which can be one of the major benefits of home educating. However this is largely through informal settings, such as meeting in parks or at local attractions, or through leveraging existing groups such as children's sports and social clubs. Where it is arranged in the form of a support group it is often - at least in our area - still primarily a social arrangement, with academic pursuits taking place at home or in other settings. These opportunities have been mostly outlawed through the recent regulations. Where it would be possible to argue they are still allowed under the educational provisions, the groups often rely on the use of community centres and village halls, many of which have not reopened. This is having a major impact on the health and happiness of children. To many extents this also applies to schooled children, however now that the schools are back and rightly being prioritised, it is hard to see that home educated children are still suffering from the restrictions.

Academically, the primary impact on us has been the uncertainty and cancellation of exams. We were of course already set up with remote and home learning that continued without any issues throughout the various lockdowns, although many of the extremely valuable 'extra' educational experiences - theatre trips, meeting up with classmates, visiting historical sites and museums, local astronomy clubs, etc - have not been possible. It's important to note that the experience of many families who usually use school and found this period difficult, does not reflect the everyday reality of a home educating family.

November 2020