

Written evidence submitted by Family Education Trust

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

FAMILY EDUCATION TRUST

RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON HOME EDUCATION

About Family Education Trust

For nearly fifty years, Family Education Trust has conducted research into the causes and consequences of family breakdown. By means of its publications and conferences, and through its media profile, the Trust seeks to stimulate informed public debate on matters affecting the family, with a view to promoting family stability and the welfare of children and young people.

Family Education Trust is a registered charity and has no religious or political affiliations.

The duties of local authorities with regards to home education, including safeguarding and assuring the quality of home education

The current approach taken by local authorities to home education strikes an appropriate balance between concern for child protection and respect for family privacy. Local authorities have the power to intervene if a child is not receiving adequate education or is at risk of abuse.

We are concerned that if a local authority were to assume the task of routinely assessing the suitability of the educational provision in all home educating families, regardless of whether any concerns have been expressed, that this would undermine the responsibility that parents bear for making decisions about their children's education. It would also involve an unnecessary drain on public resources which would be much better used to help those children most at risk.

While it may be reasonable for a local authority to make informal enquiries when concerns have been raised as to whether parents are fulfilling their legal duty to provide a full-time and efficient education, local authorities should take care not to be over-prescriptive. They should recognise that all children are individuals and that the flexibility afforded by home education may mean that outcomes do not neatly dovetail with expectations in a school context.

Local authorities should also show respect and sensitivity to parents. Many parents may find it intimidating to be asked for a comprehensive description of their philosophy and approach to the education of their children, particularly when there is an expectation that they will be judged against it.

Representatives of local authorities should only make visits to the homes of home-educating families when there are genuine concerns about the quality of the education provided or serious safeguarding issues. Otherwise, such visits should be avoided. Many children would find it a frightening and intimidating experience to be questioned about their education when it is so closely bound up with their family life. And many home educating parents would be fearful that their children would be placed in a very vulnerable situation given that a local authority officer with little understanding of or sympathy for home education could easily manipulate the situation. Only in the most exceptional circumstances where there is a solid basis for safeguarding concerns should the local authority insist on meeting the child.

Local authorities should act in the spirit of the Elective home education guidelines for local authorities, as updated in 2019, which state that while local authorities may ask parents for information about the education they are providing *‘Parents are under no duty to respond to such enquiries’* and that while *‘Informal enquiries can include a request to see the child, either in the home or in another location... the parent is under no legal obligation to agree to this simply in order to satisfy the local authority as to the suitability of home education.’*

The benefits children gain from home education, and the potential disadvantages they may face

We are not aware of any disadvantages experienced by home-educated children. On the contrary, home education can have immense benefits for a child as parents are able to assess more clearly where their child’s talents and abilities lie and nurture those abilities in a way that will benefit them in the future. Home education can be tailored to a child’s individual interests thereby creating a more stimulating environment for them. Home education also provides a level of flexibility so that education can be adjusted to a child’s abilities. For example, if a child is exceptionally gifted in a particular area, their parents can speed up their education in that area so that they may learn things that they would not otherwise learn about for another few years if they were in school. Similarly, if a child is slower in certain subjects, their education in these areas can be slowed down. It is less easy to do this in a school environment where all subjects are rigidly timetabled and education is strictly segregated by age group.

Home education can be safe and nurturing environment for children who have experienced bullying. It can also encourage self-directed study, leaving children well-equipped for higher education.

We would like to give an example of the wonders that home education has worked in one particular family that we are familiar with.] In this family of [number] children, all were home educated. While the younger children are still in the process of being educated, the three who have attained adulthood have all graduated into successful careers. The [personal information] while still a teenager was winning essay competitions writing on complex religious and political subjects. As an adult she has qualified as an accountant specialising in

taxation for a major firm in the City. She has won awards in her field of work though she is still only in her [age]. The [personal information] child has successfully qualified as a teacher. The [personal information] child's speciality was architecture. While still a teenager he was teaching architecture to adults and he now occupies a major position in a firm of architects. In this case, home education allowed these children to really hone their talents in the areas where they excelled.

Whether a statutory register of home-educated children is required

We are strongly opposed to the creation of such a register.

Under education law, parents are responsible for ensuring that their children receive a full-time efficient education, whether they send them to school or fulfil their legal duty 'otherwise' (Education Act 1996, s7).

Education is one among many responsibilities that parents bear towards their children, along with feeding them, clothing them, caring for them, protecting them, seeing to their health needs etc. Parents should no more have to register with the state to educate their children than they should be required to apply for a licence to feed and clothe their children, and provide for their other needs.

The position of home-educating parents is comparable to that of full-time parents of a pre-school-aged child: if parents choose to place their child in some form of child care or day nursery, they go through a registration process, but no form of registration or monitoring is required for them to care for their own child at home. We see no compelling reason why that should change at the beginning of the term after a child reaches the age of five.

Since it is parents who bear the legal responsibility to ensure their children receive a full-time and efficient education, home-education should similarly be viewed as the default position, requiring no registration with the state. When parents educate their children at home, they are no more performing a public function than when they feed them, clothe them, nurse them back to health, and care for them in an infinite number of other ways. It is important to remember that the family is a private institution, not an arm of the state. Parents should not be required to register in order to perform any of the responsibilities they bear towards their children - whether it be feeding them, clothing them or educating them.

Statutory registration of home-educated children involves an unwarranted and unnecessary interference in the life of the family and the administration of a statutory register would be a drain on the local authorities' resources.

The role that inspection should play in future regulation of home education

We see no evidence that inspection of home education is necessary or justified. If parents are failing to provide their children with adequate education, local authorities already have the power to address this.

The current guidelines on Elective Home Education clearly state that inspection is not necessary:

The current legal framework is not a system for regulating home education...or forcing parents to educate their children in any particular way...Ofsted has no responsibility for inspecting the provision of home education...

In order for inspection to be carried out there would need to be a statutory register of home-educated children and as we have stressed in our response to the previous question such a register would involve an unwarranted and unnecessary interference in the life of the family.

We have to ask the question how would inspection of home education actually work? One of the strengths of home education is the diversity of approaches taken. This diversity would make inspection impractical. It has previously been proposed that inspectors could interview children as to whether they wished to be home-educated or would prefer to be in school. Yet pupils in school are not routinely interviewed in connection with their school experience and asked if they would prefer to be home educated, and we are not convinced that home educated children should be interviewed along similar lines either. Many children would find it a frightening and intimidating experience to be questioned about their education when it is so closely bound up with their family life. And many home educating parents would be fearful that their children would be placed in a very vulnerable situation given that a local authority officer with little understanding of or sympathy for home education could easily manipulate the situation.

Local authorities assuming the task of routinely assessing the suitability of the educational provision in all home educating families, regardless of whether any concerns have been expressed, undermines the responsibility that parents bear for making decisions about their children's education. It also involves an unnecessary drain on public resources.

It should also be borne in mind that home educating families typically do not draw a distinction between education and family life – the two are very much intertwined. It is for this reason that many are so uncomfortable about the prospects of registration and inspection. They would feel that their family life was being monitored and their children surveilled to a degree not experienced by children attending school.

Whether the current regulatory framework is sufficient to ensure that the wellbeing and academic achievement of home educated children is safeguarded, including where they may attend unregistered schools, have been formally excluded from school, or have been subject to 'off-rolling'

A clear distinction needs to be made between parents who freely choose to home educate and those who find themselves withdrawing their children from school as a result of pressure from the school. The two categories should not be conflated. Unregistered, illegal schools, exclusion and 'off-rolling' are a separate matter and should not be equated with home schooling. We are concerned that such an equation effectively stigmatises home educating parents, suggesting that they are doing something illegal or abusive. However, many parents home educate precisely to protect their children from abuse or bullying that they have received in school. Furthermore, research has found that home-educated children are two or three times less likely to be subject to a Child Protection Plan than children in school.¹

¹ Wendy Charles-Warner, Home Education and the Safeguarding Myth: Analysing the Facts Behind the

We believe therefore that the current regulatory framework is sufficient to ensure the wellbeing of home-educated children.

The quality and accessibility of support (including financial support) available for home educators and their children, including those with special educational needs, disabilities, mental health issues, or caring responsibilities, and those making the transition to further and higher education

Any support for home educating parents and their children should be given on an entirely voluntary basis and specifically at the parents' request. However, advice and support for home educators is not a service that local authorities are normally qualified and equipped to provide. As a general rule, the best service that a local authority can provide in this area is to signpost local informal home education support groups and networks, and the parents of older children who have completed their home education. Experienced home educators will be better qualified and equipped to provide advice and support to other home educating parents than local authority personnel whose experience and training is generally more geared to a school environment.

Local authorities may offer assistance to home educating parents, but they should not seek to impose it on them. Offers of support are acceptable but only if they are things that local authorities might choose to offer on a voluntary basis, which home educating families may choose to make use of if they wish without any requirement or expectation that they will do so. It is very important that support from the local authority is offered to those who wish to receive it and not imposed.

One area in which home educators could be supported however would be the provision of at least one education centre at which home educated young people might sit public examinations.

November 2020