

Written evidence submitted by Taunton Home Education

Home Education Inquiry - Education Committee

Response by Taunton Home Education

5 Nov 2020

1. Taunton Home Education is a support group of and for home educating families in Taunton and surrounding areas. We provide friendship, mutual support, information, advocacy and a range of social and educational activities. We are also an AQA Unit Awards Centre and a Duke of Edinburgh Awards Centre.
2. We would urge members of the Committee to use this inquiry as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of home education and to champion greater respect and freedom for home educating families. What is needed is a sea-change in approach, public policy wise. Too often home education is regarded by vested educational interests as a 'problem' that needs 'fixing' when in fact it is an extremely valuable resource for this country that should be nurtured and supported. We would be happy to give oral evidence, if asked. Please see our response to the Government EHE consultation 2018 for more detail about our views on the undesirability of intrusive state practices and positive proposals for reform.
<https://www.tauntonhomeeducation.com/publications>

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

3. In law, it is parents – first and foremost - who are responsible for their children's education and ensuring its suitability. The duties of local authorities with regards to home education are – or *should be* - restricted to - making formal enquiries and intervening only when concerns about the suitability of children's home education is brought to their attention. Many local authorities – encouraged by unhelpful amendments to Government guidance - appear to think their duties go further than this which is the cause of much overstepping and unhelpful interference leading to mistrust and discrimination.

4. Home education is not a safeguarding issue. Home educated children are at less safeguarding risk than their schooled peers (<http://www.home-education.org.uk/articles/article-safeguarding-myth.pdf>).
5. Assuring the quality of home education is, rightly, the responsibility of the parents of a given child in the context of their duty to provide a suitable education, it is not a duty upon the local authority.

Whether a statutory register of home-educated children is required

6. No. It is both unnecessary and highly undesirable. The vast majority of home educators are known to local authorities already since schools pass on information when a child is deregistered from a school – what benefit that is to those families though, is debatable. Many who are not known to the relevant team within their local authority - usually those whose children have never been registered at a school - see little benefit in - and may also, with justification, be mistrustful of - notifying the local authority because to do so invites potential negativity and inappropriate intrusion. Forcing families to 'register' would be stigmatising, discriminatory and counterproductive, creating the conditions for creeping state control of home education which would stamp out innovation, creativity and personalisation- the three things which are crucial to a meaningful education. If local authorities are known to be fair, respectful and collaborative, with a positive attitude to home education and offer some meaningful benefits, then they are more likely to gain home educating parents trust and gain greater knowledge and understanding of their local home educating communities.

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

7. Home education has huge benefits for children including:-
 - Freedom to learn at a pace and in a way which best suits the child's individual - and any special - needs.
 - Freedom from rigid, government-determined curricula.
 - Freedom from rigid timetables, standardised methods and norms which can damage the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of many children with additional needs.

- Greater ability to follow your interests and passions, develop life skills and hone particular talents.
 - Safety and freedom from the bullying which is rife in the school system.
 - Freedom from negative peer pressure and the ability to be yourself.
8. Disadvantages faced by home educated children stem from the ignorance and prejudice of decision makers and barriers to accessing certain formal qualifications; even though parents pay taxes towards the education system they are not afforded free access to exams for their children and instead must pay upwards of £100 for each GCSE and more for A Levels. Like many schooled children, home educated children with SEND face huge barriers to timely formal assessment and diagnosis and are denied effective state support; luckily peer support is available in abundance within the home education community.

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;

9. The state provides no support financial or otherwise to home educated children and families. SEND support in general is woefully lacking as are Children's Mental Health Services and support services for young carers following more than a decade of austerity.
10. To facilitate access to qualifications and the widest possible range of career opportunities, there is a need for an expansion of bespoke, inclusive, part-time 14-16 provision for electively home educated youngsters and for a 'stage not age' approach to be adopted; currently funding regimes are too restrictive and tied to outdated 'year group' approaches which don't always suit our needs.
11. In Somerset there is a highly enlightened Post-16 Commissioning Adviser Dr Julie Young who has been a fantastic support to us - she is passionate about every young person finding the pathway that is right for them and ensuring our young people can access individual guidance on post-16 options. She has opened many doors for our young people. We would urge you to recommend this positive approach is retained in Somerset

post any local government reorganisation and indeed that it be invested in more heavily and adopted across all local authority areas.

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'

12. If correctly interpreted and used then the current legal framework is sufficient to deal with unregistered schools and 'off-rolling'. Stop conflating home education with unregistered schools - they are completely separate issues.
13. Many children and young people are indeed being home educated because the state has failed them. Home education is a life line for many families determined to act in their children's best interests in the face of state negligence. The parents who have deregistered their children because they have been discriminated against, injured, harmed, bullied, excluded or who have been essentially 'dumped' by the system tend to be extremely committed and positive home educators. Having made a best interests decision to remove their child to get them a suitable, safe education at home, these parents go to great lengths to make their provision the best it can be and deserve full respect.
14. If you want to ensure that all home educators are doing so as a first choice, then get rid of Ofsted and league tables, reform the school system so it is more a springboard for development, happiness and autonomous learning rather than the current sausage machine/exam factory and fund SEND provision, alternative provision and specialist education properly.

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

15. There is no useful role for 'inspection' save for inspecting local authorities to ensure they are not overstepping and that the staff who interact with home educating families are properly trained. Staff training should be a major focus for this inquiry – education welfare officers or their equivalent have woefully inadequate understanding of different approaches to learning and too often wilfully overstep. Home education

is part and parcel of family life and it is wholly inappropriate for the state to seek to regulate that.

16. Be advised that if politicians ever succeed in changing the law so that families are subject to strict checks and externally imposed goals (heaven forbid), then families would demand 'per child' funding such as schools receive. That could then lead to other parents dissatisfied with the school system and indeed parents of children in private schools to demand that state funding is devolved to them. It could cost the state dearly.

What improvements have been made to support home educators since the 2010-15 Education Committee published their report on 'Support for Home Education' in 2012

17. None. No improvements in exam access. Relations between local authorities and home education communities in most respects have got worse with only a few exceptions. There are no 'local support' offers in the vast majority of areas – the most you will find, if you are lucky, are some links on a website. Local authorities often seek to cast their unlawful 'monitoring' activities as part of a 'support offer' which is deeply deceitful. To top it all, we have had local authorities breaching GDPR and continuing to share personal information unlawfully and a 'Children's Commissioner' in post who has actively opposed the interests of home educated children and young people in seeking to rob them of their freedom to live and learn in the way that best suits them.
18. For a short time Somerset had a progressive Education Welfare Manager, John Riches, who instituted positive change but officers change regularly, their good work can be undermined by out of touch 'higher ups' and collective memory of good practice tends to fade fast. Our group has been lucky in that Dr Julie Young – who is not part of the EHE function which is sadly now under 'Education Safeguarding' (sic) - has taken a sympathetic interest in home educated young people and, as described above, has started to open up greater opportunities for them. Through Julie we have begun working with the parts of the Support Services for Education directorate at the County Council who run Duke of Edinburgh Awards and outdoor activities and they have been brilliant. If 'working with' rather than 'checking up on/policing' was the basis of local authority interactions with home educators this would

be a great benefit to outcomes for home educated children and young people.

The impact COVID-19 has had on home educated children, and what additional measures might need to be taken in order to mitigate any negative impacts.

19. Like other children, home educated children were unable to socialise and enjoy many of their usual activities during lockdown. Our families, however, are incredible resourceful and positive – they have used the new online resources including zoom, formed support bubbles and made the most of more time at home; now we are building back in-person activities slowly in a Covid-safe way (despite the lack of bespoke guidance).
20. The cancellation of exams this year in favour of teacher-predicted grades had a significantly detrimental impact on many home-educated children, who were not able to gain qualifications, as research by the Centre for Social Mobility, University of Exeter has highlighted. It is imperative this never happens again – if exams are cancelled in future then the Government, Ofqual and local authorities must ensure home educated young people do not lose out. Of course even in ‘normal’ times, home educators face gross inequities in terms of access to exams – an entitlement to free exam access must be established swiftly, alongside an expansion of opportunities to access other formal qualifications outside school.
21. Lockdown home schooling is in no way comparable to home education per se. It is imperative that the negative attitudes by *some* parents to suddenly having their schooled children at home do not permeate or inform future policy on home education.
22. COVID-19 should have been a wake-up call to rethink education – to make blended, flexible, personalised learning a right and a reality for all. We fear that opportunity may be wasted.
23. As an endword, home educators are weary of decision makers soliciting our views then ignoring them. The mantra of public policy on home education should be ‘nothing about us, without us’. Rather than policy driven by school-obsessed traditionalists who seem to think the state ‘owns’ children, we need a new approach rooted in stronger respect for

families, real understanding of the diversity of home education approaches and a real recognition of the value of self-directed learning.

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