

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Harriet Pattison

I am a senior lecturer in Early Childhood at Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool with a specialism in home education. I have been researching in the area for over 2 decades, particularly in the areas of home education pedagogy, philosophy, policy and minority home education. I conducted the largest to date research project into how home educated children learn to read. Part of this study was submitted as my PhD thesis in 2014.

### **The duties of local authorities in regard to home education, including safeguarding and assuring the quality of home education;**

These two issues need to be kept apart. It is misleading and unhelpful to conflate them.

#### **Safeguarding**

Social Services have a duty to intervene when there is reason to believe serious harm has or is likely to take place (s. 47 Children's Act (1989). This is regardless of the form of education the child is receiving. There is no evidence to support the view that home-education itself is a safeguarding concern (DfE Elective Home Education Guidance for LAs - April 2019 Guideline 7.3). All the evidence suggests that the system works well; there has been no serious case involving a home educated child of which Social Services have not been aware. In fact, there is also evidence that home-educated children are less likely to be abused than school-attending children (Charles-Warner, 2016). There is no evidential foundation for the view that home education and radicalisation are linked (Charles-Warner, 2017, Pattison 2020b).

The conflation of home education and safeguarding in general terms has led to widespread resentment on the part of home educators and unwarranted assumptions on the part of LAs. For the sake of good working relations it would be very helpful for this unwarranted connection to be dropped. My own work with Muslim home educators suggests that accusations and attitudes which combine the two drive home educators away from authority, increasing isolation and fuelling suspicion on both sides (Pattison, 2020a & b).

#### **Assuring the quality of home education**

This is a difficult area in that 'quality' seems to be read as adherence to school standards. In fact my research, and that of others, has shown that home educators have far greater flexibility in how they educate their children than is possible in institutions catering for large numbers of children and constrained by legislation such as the national curriculum.

Home education pedagogy is rich in variation, is usually far more learner led than school could ever hope to be, is not tied to age related bench marks and is not dependent on a hierarchy of skills. For example, the emphasis on reading and writing in school as the key to access all other areas of the curriculum is not the case in home education where other pedagogical methods such as the verbal, the visual and the hands on are practical and successful. In short, not only need home education bear little resemblance to school education, it is also highly individualised and flexible (Pattison, 2016, Pattison 2017, Thomas and Pattison 2007,). This means that quality assurance would need to be similarly flexible and individualised. My own research for example revealed the wide age range within which home educated children learn to read. This is very different to the narrow window for reading achievement deemed desirable in school. This flexibility has numerous advantages and works extremely well within the context of home education but is very poorly understood outside it (Pattison, 2016). In fact it is a major problem

that LAs have negligible knowledge of how home education works and revert to judging its quality through referral to school. This is misguided, inappropriate and frankly ignorant. Assuring the quality of home education has to begin with educating those who wish for this assurance. Active willingness on the part of policy makers and LAs to learn from home educators would bring home education into the policy cycle, allowing it to be based on evidence that supports this legal and increasingly popular choice. It would also go a long way towards dispelling the bad blood that has marred home educators' relationships with LAs and would help ensure that this important educational freedom is properly upheld to the good of all involved.

A second point here is that LAs should ensure that they do not overstep their legal remits. They do not have the right to bully families into certain forms of education or force them to emulate school practices simply because they do not themselves understand the alternatives.

### **whether a statutory register of home-educated children is required;**

The 2012 Education Select Committee inquiry into Home Education judged that a register is not required. I am not aware that there are any new arguments for one. It is unclear what this register would be used for and why it is needed. The repeated calls for a register are very unsettling, particularly as they lack clear reasons. Home educators are already fearful that their opportunity to educate their children in the effective, individualised and diverse methods of home education is under threat. Registration appears as licensing by the back door; a tool by which to curtail their chance to do the best for their children.

I note that the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, seems to have misled the Education Select Committee on 6th October, when she said, "The register was agreed. There is a commitment from the DfE for that compulsory register, but we have not yet seen it emerge." (source: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/993/html/Q1020>). Such false statements from senior figures are very unhelpful for trustful and honest relationships between home educators and authorities. They are also entirely unnecessary.

### **the benefits children gain from home education, and the potential disadvantages they may face;**

Home education is personalised, flexible, can play to learner interests, harness self-motivation and enjoyment, allow for wider, deeper learning than the national curriculum, is supportive of confidence and positive self-development, is less competitive, less constrained by testing and less passive than school. Parents who home educate are highly committed to their children and to maximising the benefits for their child. Parents are also the people most likely to understand what will be of greatest benefit to their child. For some therefore this will be a freedom to follow their interests and not to be under the pressure of school constraints, for others it may be to learn free from bullying and social anxiety, for others it may be the possibility to learn at their own pace and in their own way.

Because parents are so attuned to their children and the benefits they wish to maximise, it is my experience that parents do not allow their children to be disadvantaged. For example, in my research on reading, if one approach was not working or did not interest their child, parents quickly found a different way to address the matter. Again, this is an example of the flexibility for which home education allows.

A disadvantage over which parents have less power is the discrimination against home education which is fuelled by unwarranted accusations (Soley, 2017) and unsupported suspicions (Longfield 2019).

**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;**

Financial support is not available. Home educators bear all the costs of home education, including exam entries. Other support seems to be something of a postcode lottery with some LAs offering support in various forms and others not. Home educators often belong to local groups and build support for each other on community levels.

**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';**

This question is an example of the unnecessary conflation with which home educators have to contend. Children formally excluded and those attending unregistered schools are not home educated. Off rolling is an issue which should be tackled through the schools who are guilty of this; not through parents attempting to pick up the pieces. Non-elective and illegal practices should not be bundled together with home education and this needs to be clear in all policy makers' minds.

Other than that, safeguarding has been addressed in the point above. Safeguarding is separate to education and is the remit of Social Services. I have discussed above the ways in which home education may differ from school education. Any assessment of educational achievement needs to be based closely on the evidence about learning at home which offers different learning trajectories to those imposed in schools.

It also needs to be recognised that any standards expected of home education should be consistent with the standards set in schools. We already know that the NHS, Unicef and The Children's Society have raised concerns about the wellbeing and mental health of the UK's children and that around 20% of children leave the UK's school without the benchmark 5 GCSEs. If levels of academic achievement and wellbeing are to be set for home educated children then the state needs to ensure that these standards are also being met in schools. Otherwise we run the risk that a child judged not to be achieving at home or meeting standards of wellbeing is then forced, via a SAO, into a similar or worse situation in school.

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

The Education Committee Report (2012) made it clear that local authorities have no mandate to routinely monitor home education. I have outlined above the high levels of ignorance displayed by LAs about home education. No one should inspect anything until they have a well-grounded idea of what it is they are inspecting. This can only be achieved through an ongoing cycle of education

for LAs on the pedagogies, practices, philosophies and achievements of home education and would itself require a large scale commitment to research in the subject. There appears to be no appetite for this at the moment.

**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;**

I am not aware of any improvements.

**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.'**

Home education has not been recognised in COVID policy. No exemptions have been made for home educating groups in terms of social gathering limitations. No consideration has been made of the detrimental impact on education. The situation for home educated students who missed out on exams this summer and may be struggling to find provision now has not been considered (Merrett et al, 2020).

Guidance on home-education gatherings was confusing and focused on school type scenarios rather than demonstrating any understanding of how home education operates.

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