

Written evidence submitted by Stockport Council

Education Committee – Home Education Inquiry Call for evidence (Deadline 6th November 2020)

Response from Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

Stockport Council is the local authority for the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport, which is part of Greater Manchester. We are responding to this call for evidence because local authorities have a duty under s.436A of the Education Act 1996 to make arrangements to establish, so far as it is possible to do so, the identities of children in its area who are not receiving a suitable education. This extends to ensuring that electively home educated children are receiving a suitable education.

The updated DfE Guidance on EHE, published in April 2019, provides local authorities with more detail and clarification of relevant law than had previously been published. We do however believe it is essential that further guidance is issued on how local authorities should assess suitability and quality of home education, including progression, and how parents should evidence this. Currently each LA has their own interpretation of the guidance and the lack of clarity can make it difficult to conclude whether or not education is 'suitable'. Further guidance would also be welcome on the use of 'cooling off' periods.

The Inquiry will be aware that parents do not need to inform their local authority if they choose to home educate their child. Whilst systems are in place to ensure that schools inform the LA when a child is removed from their roll for EHE, if a child has never attended school or moves into the area, the LA will not know about that child unless informed by the parent or another professional. It is therefore highly likely that there are children being home educated that local authorities are unaware of.

We believe a statutory register is necessary to assist local authorities in meeting their statutory duty under s.436A of the Education Act 1996 and to eliminate, as far as possible, a potentially 'hidden' group of children for whom the LA has no oversight in terms of education and safeguarding. It would allow LAs to make contact with more home educating families, enabling them to access support and services they may be entitled to. Knowing the 'true' number of EHE children will also assist local authorities in allocating resources to this growing group of children and associated area of work.

Home education is not appropriate for all families, but some parents feel that they are left with no alternative, for example because their child has additional needs and/or mental health issues which are not being adequately supported by school. As an LA, we have seen an increase in the number of families opting for EHE pre-COVID because of unmet SEND or anxiety/mental health issues, rather than choosing EHE for a philosophical reason or lifestyle choice. Whilst many children with SEND or mental health issues benefit from home education which is structured around their needs, away from the 'stresses' of the school environment, it does raise questions as to why there are so many families that feel schools are unable to meet the needs of their children.

Whilst EHE has benefits for many families, it can be expensive and challenging for parents as it requires spending time and money on resources and planning to ensure their child progresses and remains motivated and engaged in their learning. Families on lower incomes are less likely to be able to fund tutors, online learning packages etc.

Often children that become home educated in Years 10 or 11 will not go on to take GCSEs. This clearly puts them at a disadvantage given the qualification-based system for further education, training and employment. Electively home educated pupils that do go on to take GCSEs are limited as to where they can

sit the exams and the cost can be prohibitive for many families. Frequently families will elect to home educate in the best interest of their child, but due to financial constraints are unable to pay for the exams that can be accessed by pupils on a school roll. Local secondary schools are extremely reluctant to allow external candidates to sit exams so home educated pupils can end up travelling some distance to an appropriate exam centre.

In most local authorities, services which work with children in schools are not always available to electively home educated pupils because they are funded by schools through buy back arrangements. Clearer guidance from the DfE about expectations of LAs in relation to support and services to EHE pupils would be helpful.

We have welcomed Ofsted's interest in off-rolling, however it is difficult to prove that EHE has been suggested or encouraged by a school, for example as an alternative to permanent exclusion or in relation to poor attendance, as LAs are usually presented with two differing accounts of how the EHE decision came about from parents and the school. We would welcome guidance on how this can best be evidenced by LAs. We suggest that Ofsted, when carrying out school inspections, should consider contacting the LA to confirm details of the pupils that have become home educated from the school in question in the preceding years to query the circumstances of each. This will enable Ofsted to interrogate the reasons given for EHE by the school, which may differ to what has been reported to the LA by home educating families.

COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in EHE numbers. The DfE guidance on school attendance from September 2020 states very clearly that all pupils must attend school unless they are self-isolating related to COVID-19 or are in the very small group of children who have been advised to continue shielding by a Consultant. There are many families with genuine concerns about their children attending school because they or a member of their household/support bubble has a medical condition which would leave them vulnerable should they contract COVID. An increasing number of these families are opting for EHE as they feel they are left with no alternative and this is likely to increase further as the infection rate grows and parents increasingly face challenge in relation to irregular school attendance. In the current circumstances, we would welcome more flexibility within the DfE guidance for schools in how they manage COVID-related absence, for example allowing headteachers the discretion to authorise a pupil's absence and provide remote education depending on the individual circumstances and health concerns of the family. This would allow pupils to maintain their education in line with their peers and support their eventual return to school.

Home educated pupils were disadvantaged by the arrangements put in place for the summer 2020 GCSE examinations as many were unable to get a GCSE grade due to not having teacher assessments. We are concerned about summer 2021 exams for EHE pupils. Many of the exam centres local to our area have advised that they are no longer accepting external candidates due to COVID-19 restrictions. Unless families can afford to pay for online providers such as Oxford Home Schooling and/or register with an exam centre, they may be left without a GCSE grade. We would welcome guidance as soon as possible from the DfE and/or Ofqual about how this will be resolved for EHE pupils in relation to the summer 2021 examinations should they be cancelled.

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