

He-special (www.he-special.org.uk) is a long standing website and email list offering support for parents and carers who are, or are thinking of, electively home educating children with a wide range of special educational needs and disabilities, including but not limited to: genetic conditions such as Down syndrome and Ehlers-Danlos syndrome/hypermobility spectrum disorder, and other genetic syndromes; congenital conditions such as Cerebral Palsy, Autistic Spectrum Conditions; acquired brain injury; and specific and general learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, speech and language disorders, and delayed development. It should also be noted that many children have more than one condition.

This submission is based on the experiences of several parents. As there is only one thing that brings these families together, that is that they home educate, their needs are all different and, at times, views can be opposing. We seek to present the varied views of all members of the group.

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

Under the current law it is the parents who have the duty to cause their child to receive an education under S.7 Education Act 1996, it is not the local authorities' duty. The local authorities only have a duty to intervene if it appears that a child is not receiving an education appropriate to their age, ability, aptitude, and special educational needs. Local authorities are there to provide services, services which are accountable to the local authority that has commissioned them. Parents are not accountable to the local authorities. Parents should be supported to provide an education not inspected. There is currently adequate laws surrounding safeguarding that allow a local authority to intervene if it appears that there are safeguarding issues. Home education or disability, either together or alone, are not safeguarding issues.

Whether a statutory register of home-educated children is required;

Because of Children Missing Education and the fact that the vast majority of children with SEND have previously been registered at a school, the LAs already know about these children and the introduction of a statutory register would only serve to distract the EHE officers from supporting families. We feel it would be better to develop stronger and more positive relationships and support families rather than make a list of the children which could result in the LAs concentrating on

hitting the target of getting all home educated children registered which would end up with them missing the point of supporting those that home educate.

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

Benefits:

- A more individualised education - those children with SEND are often very much individual in their needs.
- A more appropriate environment - quieter, calmer, etc
- One to one which can promote better learning
- Can be fit around medical appointments
- Greater flexibility , as in no limit to rigid timetables and terms.
- Many more opportunities to develop needs based life skills for SEND CYP, and so this is more appropriate to where your child is at , regardless of peers , therefore removing the need to compare and compete which is often a pressure SEND CYP can feel strongly .
- Broader opportunities to learn a whole variety of topics in a child centred way , focusing on your child's interests and strengths . Formal assessment pressures reduced so helps CYPs confidence .
- Less stress from difficulties at school which leads to happier children, which in turn leads to better outcomes.
- A large and diverse home education community that new families can access for support.

Disadvantages:

- Lack of access to resources which could be remedied by more support from the LA
- Lack of access to educational assessments; although this should not be the case, some parents have been denied assessments due to the LAs having lack of resources
- Difficulty in accessing exams
- Difficulty in finding other families, especially in a rural situation, when starting out. This could be helped by LAs supporting introductions to other families.
- Stigma and guilt felt in parents, still in present society, for being different in approach to education

- Increased financial demands to personally fund resources/social or HE clubs or meeting up with other organised groups /workshops /tutors , educational visits etc
- Increased pressure on the parent responsible to facilitate learning and be good enough for your child when majority of parents think they could not do it
- Lack of, or inconsistent support from Education Authorities . (Postcode lottery element)
- No access to Ed Psychs for example, unless you pay large costs for private assessments.
- Loss of access to health services such as therapies and diagnosis, even though clinical needs remain.
- People with low incomes (parent/carers) are excluded as a result from correct access to support services.
- Lack of funding for HE parents with SEND when financial demands are greater already for such families. This can be particularly difficult if a family has to apply for Universal Credit and are expected to be working full time.

Many of these disadvantages could be mitigated with more support from the local authorities.

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;

There is very little financial support offered to home educating parents. Even when parents have an EHCP the LA will rarely offer financial support, suggesting that if they can't afford to home educate they could send their child to school. As set out in the disadvantages above, some parents find that they have even less access to assessments than schooled children. Mental health services including assessments are often denied because doctors and others are expecting to assess a child in the classroom and parents are told because they home educate and therefore cannot have a classroom assessment, the health service will refuse to diagnose the child. Other parents have been told that the problems with the child are because they are home educating, therefore they will not be offered support until they send their child to school.

Access to health services for home educated children can be patchy. While some families find that the same therapists that visit them in schools will also visit the family at home after deregistering, other families are told that they can no longer have speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or occupational therapy. Sometimes equipment can be removed. One reason given to some families is

that equipment such as Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) is for educational purposes only and because the child might use it for non-educational purposes at home, they are told they can have that equipment. This attitude has also been used for wheelchairs and seating.

Although some families are not offered any support to transition to further and higher education, those that do often find it difficult to navigate. Even if there is an EHCP it is often a long and difficult pathway to get support for transition, including if the child wishes to go to college. Home educated children have the same difficulties as schooled children have with EHCPs; the system is under great strain due to the lack of funding.

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’;

Off rolling should be guarded against, but this is not a reason to increase the regulatory framework. The current guidance and law is adequate and sufficient, but funding to allow the EHE departments is not sufficient enough to enable LAs to support those new to home education.

Many LAs check the child isn't being off-rolled as soon as they hear a child is to be removed from the school roll, however, there is a far greater issue of children & young people, invariably with SEND, being abandoned by the education system and left with no school place yet not home educating either. LAs do not act to ensure that cohort receives an education, they allow schools to push them out and do not make alternative arrangements. There is sufficient regulatory framework to make sure this doesn't happen already. The local authorities just have to make sure they support these families to help them figure out what is best for the children, be it a return to school, a move to a different school, home education, or EOTAS.

There should be no pressure put on those families to return their children to the toxic environment of the school that has just tried to off-roll them. The families should be given more support to make home education a success rather than push to return the child to school at all costs.

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

Inspection should play no role in the future regulation of home education. Families need support. There needs to be a trusting and supportive relationship between the families and the LA. Inspection is something that is done to ensure that the letter of the law is being followed, it shouldn't be used where the duty is on the parent to educate their child.

The inspection framework currently encourages LAs to reduce the number of home educators despite it being a valid and legal option for parents. This shows the existing prejudice against our community within Ofsted. Inspections do not encourage LAs to support home education or to build good relationships with families.

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; and

Some LAs have always had a good relationship with home educators, for example Gloucestershire. They treat home educators with respect. Other LAs are what could be considered to be benign in that they don't really understand home education and SEND, but they don't interfere too much. However, some LAs are still associating elective home education with safeguarding issues and expecting families to go above and beyond the current guidance on elective home education. In other words, very little has actually changed in the last few years with most LAs maintaining the status quo.

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.'

The rhetoric surrounding the pandemic is premised on getting all children to attend school. However, not all children thrive in schools, and for some home education is the only sensible alternative. Another theme, particularly during lockdowns, is one of anxiety and mental health

problems. However, some families found that during the first lockdown, when their children were at home in a safe environment, the children's anxiety and behavioural issues melted away and their mental health improved. Some parents treated this time as an extended trial of home education and realised that it was the right type of education for their child. When lockdown eased and children were expected to go back to school, some families deregistered their children, and others sought Education other than at school (EOTAS). Some schools however put pressure on families to return their children to school regardless. Some LAs questioned whether the families needed more time to decide, and said they would keep the children on the roll for a period of time. This is not only against the law, it was clear that these families had had several months to trial home education and had already made a decision which should have been honoured.

This pressure to return children to school regardless also has an effect on parents. Parents can feel isolated and alone, with little support either from their community, or from the local authority. For many who were already home educating and receiving services they found that there was a large impact on the parents' mental and physical health when those services were either temporarily or permanently withdrawn.

This quote is from one of our members:

Adoption support workers (possibly other professionals too) are not listening to parents and understanding how Covid can affect different children in different ways. They seem to just have a blanket expectation that the Covid lockdown was bad and what precedes and follows it will be good!

Our adopted child loved the lockdown and all our struggles really did melt away, it was lovely. Since going back to reality we have seen an escalation of anxiety and issues. Anyway pre Covid we were really in a mess and our support included an adoption support worker and respite. During Covid we had one phone call, from our ASW and i unfortunately told her that things were really ok for the first time ever we had 'normal' problems that we were managing.

Since the lockdown ended and the real world kicked in everything has escalated. Pretty obvious really to a normal person that this would happen, but not apparently to the professionals!

We found out last week, without any contact since the lockdown, that our

adoption support worker has withdrawn all the support that took 6 years to build up. No check ups to see how we were, nothing.

We are devastated, how can this be right?

Additionally, some members of he-special have children with life limiting conditions, or complex conditions that mean they need to shield. For these children the natural solution is to home educate in order to keep the child safe. We have families where the main difficulties are caused by disorders such as anxiety, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder, all of which have become far more intense. For those families, it is not education and how much the child is learning that is important, but the child's mental health. A child with anxiety is not going to be able to learn regardless as to whether they are at school or at home. For those families the emphasis will be on the child's mental health, first and foremost, and pressure from the LAs to create programs of work, or set up a school at home, or show 'educational progress' would be wholly inappropriate at this moment in time, in addition to being beyond their remit.

As we are sure the committee is aware, home education does not have to look like school at home. This goes back to the statement that Baroness Ashton of Upholland made in October 2001, "However, we do not suggest that parents must carry out exactly what is written within the statement. It is for the LEAs and the parents to work together to ensure that the child receives suitable provision, recognising that provision within a school is different to that provided at home. We are not keen to take away the responsibility of LEAs to ensure that children's statements are reviewed annually, that they are monitored and that we ensure that the child receives the best possible provision. It is not meant to place additional burdens on parents." And yet parents have found some LAs asking for timetables, programmes of work, and other additional burdens, all at a time when the mental and physical health of the child is far more important.

There have been some positive changes as well. Due to the lock down and closure of schools, far more resources being made available online as well as a larger than normal number of new families opting for it. For years many home educators have struggled to access resources that were mainly aimed at schools, but suddenly with so much teaching going online, there were a huge number of new resources, not just overtly educational, but also virtual activities such as museums and other cultural activities.

It is also important to recognise that lockdown had an impact on what home education looked like. All the group activities for learning and socialising stopped. The media is full of school parents discussing their children's home education without understanding that what they experienced is not typical for home education. Nothing should be done to impact on home education until the dust settles.

Now more than ever families need support from the LAs, not coercion. School is not the right place for all children, and regardless as to whether the families had fully deregistered and is doing Elective Home Education or through an EHCP is doing EOTAS, they need support from the LAs, not hassle, because now more than ever, children with SEND need the full support of both their parents and the local authorities.

In summary, this is a quote from one of our parents, looking to the future:

Hopefully some positive changes will come out of it all - there really needs to be far more faith shown in home education, and more financial provision and (very flexible) support provided for parents who are very often working flat out 24/7 with their special needs children, and haven't the time or energy to struggle to get their needs met or 'go round the houses' till they find the right door to knock on to get help (if they ever find one, that is).