

Written evidence submitted by SPUC Safe at School

## **SPUC Safe at School response to**

### **Education Committee Call for Evidence on Home Education**

**6<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

#### **Submission made by:**

[member of the public], SPUC Education Outreach Manager, representing the SPUC Safe at School Campaign.

#### **Organisation:**

Safe at School is a leading parental advocacy group and a campaign of The Society for the Protection of Unborn, which support the rights of parents as primary educators of their children, with a particular focus on helping parents to safeguard their children in the area of relationships and sex education. Safe at School campaigns on behalf of parents, and supports them when engaging with their child's school and when they believe their children are at risk. Safe at School supports the right of parents to choose a home education for their children generally, but also supports the idea that parents who choose to send their children to school are placed to teach their children about sensitive matters such as relationships and sex within the home.

We respond to this consultation both in our expertise in the area of parental rights and children's educational welfare, but also from the points of view of our experience and connections with parents who elect to home educate their children. We address all of the listed topics of the call of evidence below:

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

Elective home education (EHE) is not for everyone, but is an increasingly popular choice for parents wanting to do the best for their children. Research by Oxford Homeschooling, by way of Freedom of Information requests, revealed that the number of students being taught at home in the UK increased by 130% between 2013 and 2018, growing from 24,824 to 57,132. Teaching is widely regarded as a rewarding profession, where the teacher gains a great sense of fulfilment realising how their efforts have helped a child or young person develop skills and knowledge they will always benefit from and build on in life. However, it's an even more fulfilling experience when it's one's own child that comes to understand and be enthusiastic about something their parent has taught them, because the level of emotional investment a parent has in their own children is so much greater. This tends to be the experience of home educating parents, and they regard teaching their children as a serious vocation to which they are highly dedicated.

A great many children thrive as a result of home education, which often produces highly self-motivated and creatively effective learners. Parents choose to home educate for a variety of reasons; including because the child learns better in the home environment,

because the child learns better under the parents' tuition, and from substantial one-to-one tuition; because the child has special needs, or because they have had particular problems at school (including bullying). In addition, because this is the best way the parent can educate their children according to beliefs and values they regard as highly important for the child's welfare and future.

**4 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;**

In the present digital age, there are now so many educational resources easily available for parents, as well as opportunities for home educators to network, share good practice and undertake various forms of training, that EHE can be a highly effective, easily resourced, enjoyable and stimulating form of education for children and young people, as well as highly fulfilling for the parent.

Children with special needs can greatly benefit from the attentive education by the parent in the home environment. However, where it is required, many families do also find it difficult to access specialist support services once they remove a child with additional needs from school. This is an issue that should be addressed. Also, the problem that home educators have of finding centres for their children to take national examinations, and the unnecessarily excessive administration charges some of them will charge in addition to the entry fee. This is also an issue that should be addressed.

**7 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;**

There do not seem to have been any real discernible and sustained improvements in relationships between Local Authority's and home educating families in the past decade, with families, on the whole, more likely to report unhelpful and unwarranted interference. One notable failure of the Government concerns the fourth recommendation (p.25) of the report:

*"4. The development of a more formalised professional association of, and/or annual conference for, home education officers, driven by those in the profession themselves, could be a welcome step in terms of sharing best practice nationally..."*

"The Association of Elective Home Education Professionals" (AEHEP), which was formed as a result of this recommendation still has no detectible website, headquarters, contact details or formal accreditation. An appalling breach of trust with the EHE community resulted from a revelation, revealed by a Freedom of Information Request, that members of AEHEP, far from supporting home educators, was in fact working with Lord Soley and making recommendations to him on his Home Education Bill which was designed to curtail their legitimate rights and freedoms to educate their children in the way they know best. Such failings of the outcomes of the report do need to be addressed.

**8 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:**

On the positive side, many families were enabled to spend a greater amount of quality time together which brought them closer together, and many parents, who may not have considered it before, got to try their hand at homeschooling for the first time. It may not work for everyone, but many found they were actually quite good at it, that they enjoyed the experience, and, most important of all, their kids made far greater educational progress in that time than they ever would have done at a conventional school. We know parents who decided to carry on homeschooling one or more of their children as it worked so well for them. With the State having done so much to undermine the role of parents, particularly with the attack on their rights over relationships and sex education, then home-schooling during lockdown proved to be a very empowering experience for many parents.

The lockdown, however, has also negatively impacted family life in England in numerous ways, including financial consequences; disruption to routines; interaction with other households, family and friends, social activities; and the pressures of being stuck indoors together for longer periods, without the same opportunities for excursions and trips out. Home educating families have been impacted by these restrictions like any other families, but, during lockdown, they have further not been able to take advantage of educational and social opportunities for their children which they would normally have, including networking with other home-school families, educational field trips, attending places of worship and community events, and the various sports and activity clubs which many home-schooled children attend.

Many home educated pupils were severely affected by the cancelling of exams in the summer and system of relying on predicted grades, which unfairly penalised elected home educators. If the Government decides for England to follow the Scottish Government in replacing National 5 (equivalent of GCSE) exams with teacher assessment and coursework, then there would need to be either retention of exams as an option or a system in place that would work also for the home educated.

**5 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';**

Elective home education does not include children who have been excluded from schools or off-rolled, nor does it include children who attend an illegal unregistered school. These are issues which should no way be conflated with the positive and entirely legal decision to home educate one's children. These are entirely separate matters to home education and should be dealt with on their own accord. There is no evidence that the current status of home educators has in any way led or contributed to these entirely separate child welfare and criminal issues, and it is unjust to stigmatise home educators in this way.

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

There is no evidence at all that elective home education is in any way a risk factor for child abuse or other safeguarding concerns, and it is a real injustice that home educators are held under suspicion or stigmatised in this kind of prejudicial way. As Wendy Charles-Warner notes in research for the Centre for Personalised Education:

*'Home educated children were found to be disproportionately scrutinised, being approximately twice as likely to be referred to Social Services ... as were children aged 0-4 years and children aged 5-16 who attend school. Despite that double referral rate, .... Referrals to Social Services were found to be 3.5 – 5 times less likely to lead to a Child Protection Plan with home educated children than with referrals of schooled children aged 5-16 ... and 5 – 7 times less likely to lead to a Child Protection Plan than referrals for children aged 0-4 years...Rates of home educated children subject to a Child Protection Plan .... were also found to be less than teaching staff guilty of abuse offences.'* (Charles-Warner, 2015).

Local authorities have a duty to make child protection interventions where there is *genuine evidence* that a child is at risk of harm, abuse or neglect, but the fact that a child or young person is being home educated should in no way indicate any kind of safeguarding concern. In this case the parents have made an entirely legal and legitimate decision over their child's education which they believe, as primary educators, to be in the child's best interests. Local authorities should in no way interfere in the normal life of families in this way, or undermine the natural rights and responsibilities of parents.

## **2 whether a statutory register of home-educated children is required; 6 the role that inspection should play in future regulation of home education;**

A mandatory registration scheme would undermine the crucial human rights principle that it is parents who are the primary educators of their children – that, where parents choose to send their children to school, it is the state or the school that educates their children on the parents' behalf. This rightly retains the responsibility for children's education as residing with their parents (as is currently recognised under English law, including the Education Act 1996) and respects the human right of parents, as recognised under international law, to educate their children according to their own beliefs and values. Whilst it is right that parents should have a legal obligation to provide a suitable education for their children, a mandatory registration scheme for home educators would, in effect, reverse the natural rights of parents and make the State the primary educators of their children. Essentially the parents would have to ask permission of the State to be able to educate their children at home – 'registration' would effectively become 'licensing'. This would be a grave and unwarranted overreach of the legitimate role of the State into the natural rights of parents, families and children.

There has been no credible evidence put forward that the current legal situation regarding elective home education is failing a significant number of children in any way. Indeed it seems to work very well for the increasing number of parents who are choosing home-

schooling for a variety of reasons, including that their children are not progressing effectively in school. Furthermore, mandatory registration would inevitably result in associated forms of state interference, including inspections and grading according to 'standards' set by the State which parents may not agree with for either academic or ideological reasons. Home educating parents would then be forced into conformity with already overregulated schools. Consequently, mandatory registration would undermine the very reasons for which parents choose home education in the first place. Their human right 'to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' would therefore be severely impacted (Article 26.3; UDHR, 1948), and would undermine many of the benefits, including the great diversity of educational styles and opportunities, that elective home education brings.

November 2020