

Written evidence submitted by [member of the public]

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

Summary

The first section of my evidence revolves around point 3. I write of our personal experience of home education, some of the advantages it has had for our family and highlight some of the difficulties we have experienced because we home educate. In the second section, I address point 1, particularly the suitability of LA HE staff and the lack of redress for home educating parents facing terrible consequences due to refusal to follow the ultra vires demands of LA staff acting illegally, or where the procedure in place for the LA to follow is illegal.

Introduction

I am a home-education expert. I am the mother of [number] children who have never been to school and who love to learn. I am extremely concerned about the effects registration and monitoring will have on our family's life and experience, and I think that the government is supremely poor at parenting (just witness all those poor children in Care who have not only suffered before coming into Care, but continue to suffer within the system). Therefore I staunchly believe that safeguarding children is the duty primarily of parents and not the state. Consequently, I seek to inform the Committee of our experiences in home education and our thoughts regarding parental involvement with LAs so that the Committee will have a broader range of experience to draw upon within this enquiry and not just the words of "professional" bodies.

3. The Benefits of Home Education/Potential Disadvantages Faced

My initial encounter with HE was at uni. The first fellow student I met happened to be home-educated, which was something I had never heard of before. Eventually, I got to know his sister and later, met the rest of the family. Both brother and sister impressed me with their maturity, excellent work-ethic, comprehension of material, compassion for others and facility to interact with varying age groups and abilities. However, I was not the only one to be impressed. All of the children of the family (6) went on to get full scholarships at the various further educational institutions they attended. At my own university, it was obvious that both brother and sister had the admiration and respect of not only the professorial faculty, but all the administration and staff as well, not to mention that of the other students. I wondered what the difference was between them and most of the rest of our peers. As I met others who had been home-educated, I grasped that home education was a key factor in the formation of their excellent characters.

My husband and I have been home educating now for over [number] years. We have [number] boys and [number] daughter, ages ranging from [ages]. We are very proud of them, particularly of their attitude towards learning and exploring, and their independent desire to do so. They have never been to school. At [age], our eldest had just completed a maths assignment when he asked me, "Momma, if I went to school, and had finished that in class, I'd be able to go outside and play on the swings for a bit while others finished, wouldn't I?" My reply was in the negative. "So what

would happen?” I answered that a few things might be possible: he might be given extra work; he might just have to sit quietly and wait patiently; he might possibly be allowed to look at a book or do something else quietly. He was astonished. “Do you mean that if I finished my work early and well, I would not be free to choose what to do with my remaining time until the next activity?” My reply was in the affirmative, dependent on the work and the teacher, etc. “So, I would have to have extra work or just sit quietly?” I responded with a yes. “So I’d be penalised for completing my work quickly and well by getting extra work or being bored?” He was staring at me with his mouth wide open in shock. I was in shock that he understood and could use the word “penalise” so effectively. I hedged, “Well, the school wouldn’t think that they would be ‘penalising’ you.” His response, “Well, they would be, even if they don’t want to think that they are. Anyway, I’ve finished this now and am going out to play. I am so glad I don’t have to learn at school!” I think that this conversation alone highlights some of the advantages to home education(HE).

This conversation also underlined an aspect of HE that we have really valued: we can introduce subjects at the child’s pace. Our second son, whose birthday [date], was very bright, but we noticed some things that made us concerned. When he was [age], and was asked to run down to the bottom of the garden and return, he would run to the bottom, stop, turn himself round and then run up, unlike his older brother, who would just run a loop to come back. Our second born would also always come down the stairs leading by the same foot for each step, and he couldn’t manage running around group games. Whingeing slightly, he would just stay in one place whilst everyone ran round him. He also felt uncomfortable jumping from anything or even in place. His fine motor skills were extremely good, whereas his gross motor skills (in which most boys excel) were comparably poor.

A friend of ours was a physiotherapist who’s speciality was dealing with children who had ADHD and similar issues. She observed him and told us that she thought that he had a problem with his vestibular system. Basically, your vestibular system is the part that coordinates your movement and centers you in the world around you. For example, if someone is car sick, than their vestibular system is not working properly and picking up the cues that the body is stationary whilst the vehicle is moving and yet the eyes can change their viewpoint. Another example would be a gawky teenager who seems constantly klutzy—it is usually because their vestibular system hasn’t calibrated to the fact that although their main body hasn’t changed much, their hands and feet have grown two sizes in just a few months. Anyway, our friend thought that over time, it would sort itself out, but that we could do some exercises with him to help it develop. We are convinced that if he’d gone to nursery, Reception or Year 1, he would have been labelled as having a special need, and that would have been potentially unhelpful. He did have a special need: time; time to develop and grow without having to measure up to an unhelpful mean. We decided that we would also delay teaching him to read until he seemed ready (his brother learned by the time he was [age]). When our second son was [age], we were on a holiday in [place] and he called to us from a tree that was twice his height. He then jumped from it, landing perfectly, and ran off, completely oblivious to the fact that anything unusual had occurred. A month after returning from this holiday, he informed us that he thought he was ready to learn how to read now. And he was!

Our fourth child has also tremendously benefited from the attuned environment of home education. He is incredibly intelligent; he worked out, on his own, how to tell time by both analogue and digital clocks simultaneously when he was [age] yrs old. However, high intelligence does not necessarily equate with corresponding maturity. For several years, he was not capable of sitting down and doing any writing or ‘school work’. We read to him a great deal, encouraged him in his interests and he was always very curious, but he struggled to accept correction, disliked being wrong with incredible intensity, hated being told what to do and always wanted to win when

playing games. Like his older brother what he needed most was time, time to develop maturity and some wisdom. Fast forward to [number] months ago when we embarked on our family's established reading program with him, aged [age]. He was able to accept being wrong and understand that it is an integral part of learning and growing, as well as an opportunity to learn more, and not a criticism of his personhood. He had an aptitude for the lessons, and his handwriting became a thing of beauty. This autumn he is reading chapter books and advancing through his mathematics curriculum at an amazing pace. If we had attempted to require him to do this any earlier, it would have resulted in arguments, tears, struggle and fury. However, he now has the maturity and wisdom to manage and succeed. He would not have received that via the classroom.

The greatest disadvantages we have faced have been from some "professionals" who have already decided that home education means "no education" or "socially awkward and isolated children" or "safeguarding risk" before they have ever met us. For instance, although our surgery has been extremely supportive of our family's endeavours (they are always happy to explain in detail whenever one of the children has a question, including when one of them inquired about a poster detailing the effects of lung cancer), we once had to deal with a locum who obviously had prejudices. We had made an advanced appointment seeking a referral to the paediatric physio department for some muscle exercises, but our GP was ill. When our family filed in, the locum asked why the siblings were not in school. When informed of the fact that we home educated, she proceeded to quiz my son on his knowledge, and not with an attitude of encouragement. It took almost 10 minutes before we could get her to focus on the purpose at hand, and she kept getting sidetracked, until I challenged her as to why his education had anything to do with a medical matter. At the end of appointment, the children were quite disquieted, and all agreed that it was the worst visit they'd ever had to the GPs. Hopefully it is obvious that this is problematic on so many levels! And if we hadn't had such a good relationship with our surgery, it could have caused issues with the children resisting attendance to doctor's appointments due to sensed hostility. Unfortunately, this has not been an isolated incident in our interactions with "professionals".

We've also had unfortunate dealings with Social Services; they decided to become involved when they realized my nationality, that I was an "evangelical" Christian (read "fundamentalist" in their thinking) and, most significantly, that we home educated. After the first time they visited us, they determined that our children were socially "awkward" and "isolated" without any substance (they didn't attempt to engage the children in any sort of conversation). The year that followed was a very difficult and frustrating time for our family until the third social worker to be assigned to us. She was in her 50s, wise, gracious and very approving. She'd raised a family and had plenty of experience (whereas the other two were quite young, had no families of their own and were hindered by a poorly trained perception of home education).

Due to the influence of the first social worker, two of our children were required to join a group for socially challenged children at the local children's centre. Every child involved with the group had attended for at least a year before our children joined, and all of them attended school. The meets occurred once a week in term time for 2 hours. Whilst ours attended, the playworkers had nothing but praise for them. The other children regularly confided in my two, who would share with me anything they thought was concerning, which I would then feed back to the playworkers confidentially so that it could be handled better (such as bad dreams, bed wetting, feeling unwanted due to divorce, etc.). Our son and daughter were regularly commended to me for their nice manners and respectful attitude and for how they encouraged the other children to participate in games and new activities.

A tea was served at each session before the group ended for the day. Our children always asked to get down and then they cleared their places as well. The other children would get down without asking and leave their plates behind. One of the playworkers (they experienced four different ones whilst there) decided that it was a good thing for all of them to clear their own places. Once that was established, all the other children followed our son and daughter's lead and began to ask politely to get down. Their example also began to be copied in saying "please" and "thank you" in different circumstances whilst there. The other families reported that their children seemed more settled at home and had begun to say "please" and "thank you" regularly. An accident with Hama beads resulted in the floor being covered with them. The children playing with them began to pick them up one by one. Our daughter went over and said, "You will never be able to get them all up that way. You need to sweep them up." When they responded that they did not know how to do this, she was flabbergasted. "Well, come here then and I will show you how", she told them and apparently proceeded to give all of them (the rest of the children had wandered over) a lesson in how to sweep a floor properly. After demonstrating what to do, she then had each of the others sweep until everything was cleared. "See," she said, "wasn't that easy? And all of us working together made it faster to tidy." The playworkers were well impressed, and the other parents reported that their children were being more helpful around the house. In fact, although we were "released" from Social Services at the beginning of [month] that year, they insisted that the children continue to attend the group because they were such a stabilizing influence on the others and they were afraid that all the progress would be derailed if our two stopped coming.

The above accounts really emphasize the prejudices that those in "safeguarding" roles often have towards home educators. Because we do not conform to what is considered the "norm" we are unfairly labelled and unjustly slandered. Although we may all follow different pedagogies, I have never met another home educator who would not listen to their children as we did and seek to prepare them as best within the child's abilities to manage in the world around them. Ironically, our "socially awkward and isolated children" taught the other "schooled" children how to behave and communicate with each other and adults in appropriate ways. How could they have done so if what the social workers put in their report as to the necessity of their involvement with our family was really true? And we have no means to challenge that report—their unsubstantiated opinion stays on our record for ever.

Conversely, in regard to the general public, the children have experienced frequent open approval. An illustration of this occurs regularly at our local [supermarket], but there was a specific conversation I had with the assistant manager there that underlines this. I arrived one morning on my own, as my husband had the day off. The manager inquired as to the children's whereabouts, and then said, "You know, we were all talking about your family the other day. We'd had a few difficult incidents involving various children that day, and one of the staff said that they'd wished you all would come in. We all agreed that your children are the nicest ones to come in here; they are our favorites. We are so impressed with them: always polite and respectful, never running around or causing havoc and always so helpful. Oh, and your eldest, he is so sweet. The last time you shopped he found a glass jar of peanut butter smashed on the floor. He alerted staff and then stayed put until someone could come because there were a few littlies around, and then he offered to help us clean it up. He is so lovely, I could just eat him up!" (Our eldest was [age] at the time.) This was quite an affirmation, and, thankfully, occurrences like this happen far more frequently than the negative experiences mentioned above. However, the contrast is striking, and accentuates the difference between those individuals who judge home educating families on their experience and involvement with them and those who have already decided that parents themselves are suspect and that children should be primarily the responsibility of the state before they have ever

encountered a real home educator. This latter attitude certainly seems to be the only justification for many positions within the “safeguarding industry”.

1. The Duties of Local Authorities In Regards to Home Education, Including the Quality of Education and Safeguarding

Safeguarding is a dodgy buzzword because it perpetuates a myth that a paid industry can look after and be more concerned for children than their own parents. Lord Bingham, in a judgement made in 2006, stated, “This fourfold foundation [of British education legislation] has endured over a long period because it has, I think, certain inherent strengths. First, it recognises that the party with the keenest personal interest in securing the best available education for a child ordinarily is, or ought to be, the parent of the child...” [§16] He is completely accurate in his assessment. How can a single visit by an individual once a year or even once every six months ever adequately assess the educational attainment, or indeed the safety, of any child?

This question is especially pertinent to an HE “advisor” of the LA. They usually hold more than one role within the council, and this often leads to the tragic conflation of home education and those missing in education, partly because when these individuals are hired, no one insists that they know anything about the laws surrounding their area of supposed expertise. The government seems keen to spend money putting in place a “home-ed registration scheme” when they will have people running it who have no idea what is truly legally required of them. Now, if instead there was a requirement that all HE staff had advisors who were experienced in HE, or if staff were required to consult with certain home education forums (such as Education Otherwise), then there wouldn’t be any need for such a scheme because you could be certain that those individuals or organizations would make sure that LA officers knew the law.

Beyond this, a scheme would be a waste of money because there is such a woeful lack of consistency across the sector in regards to the expected attainment of the LA official. Some LAs only insist on a NVQ Level 2 qualification, whereas others insist that their representative has to have been a teacher (note never a “home educator”). To illustrate my point, I share a text (!) communication earlier today from an LA official to a home-educating parent, “Dear [Parent] Thanks for sending me your own summary report of how the education at home going for [child]. Below are some learning links that have lots of resources within them—please browse and see which ones are suitable for [child]. Once the restrictions have lifted I will book a home visit with you to establish suitability. In the meantime can you scan/take picture of—some of his work so I can see what he is completing. Hope it continues to go well, any questions or queries please call or email.” The grammar of this missive alone is appalling, especially considering that this individual considers themselves able to judge the work of a home-educated child. In fact, it led to confusion on the part of the receiver because she wasn’t sure of the “suitability” of what? The links, or the education the parent was providing. However, the off-handed casualness of the contact, the essential lack of professionalism, combined with the presumption of “booking” a visit, is not only rude but underlines the contempt that LA HE officials have towards home-educating parents. It also reveals their ignorance of the law. Currently a parent is not required to be “assessed” that they are “suitable” to furnish an educational provision for their child, nor must they have a “home visit” or indeed any visit at all. Being forced to endure monitoring by such an individual would in no way reassure the parent that they were capable of doing so effectively.

This brings me to my greatest concern and bugbear about this Call for Evidence. Nowhere in your points do you mention a concern or solution for the handling of ultra vires complaints by terribly

harassed and worried home-educating parents who have no redress in their dealings with a LA which is behaving illegally. If an LA is acting in an ultra vires manner, the parent follows the LAs complaint procedure, which inevitably lobs the problem back into the lap of the LA official who is misbehaving. Although a parent can approach the ICO, most complaints again get ricocheted back to the LA and the very individual who caused the problems in the first place, because the ICO maintains the position that if the LA is following their own official procedure than there is no problem. This is a bit like a headteacher who declares that because the school is a “bully-free” zone, there is, pro forma, no bullying, ever. The ICO refuses to consider that the “official procedure” of the LA is actually illegal (very few LA procedures are actually legally compliant and contain many ultra vires assumptions and demands). When a parent approaches the DfE, it also lobs the problem back to the LA., again citing that the LA must follow its own procedures. The only place a parent can get redress and a proper hearing is in a court of law through a Judicial Review. Obviously, most families cannot afford this route.

This state of affairs is shockingly unjust. IF a registration/monitoring scheme is effected, attaining justice for home-educating parents will become even more of an acute problem. Before any such scheme is put in place, a proper scrutiny needs to be taken as to how to hold LAs to account regarding their illegal policy, and a means of redress needs to be provided to home educators who have encountered ultra-vires demands that devastate their home life and the education of their children. Surely the government should desire justice? And such provision for redress need not be as expensive as putting a registration scheme in place. In fact, having such a faculty would greatly increase trust between home educators and local authorities because there would be a means to call them to account for misbehavior. It is to the government’s own benefit to put such procedures in place. Home-educated children are statistically far more likely to be civically-minded and participatory citizens as adults than their schooled peers. Disenfranchised citizens lead to dissatisfaction with government. Be sensible and see to it that there is no need for dissatisfaction by providing a means to justice for home educators.

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