

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.]

Submission to the Education Committee Home Education Inquiry Call for Evidence 2020

[name] – elective home-educating parent

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

As an elective home-educating father of more than [number] years, I both take seriously the legal duty upon parents to ensure their children receive a suitable education, and greatly appreciate the freedom allowed within the law. As parents, we are both most highly-motivated to ensure that our children receive a suitable education, and best-placed to tailor it precisely to their individual needs.

Local authorities should satisfy themselves that a suitable education is being provided to children in their area (while recognising that a suitable education may take a variety of forms), and use the legal powers at their disposal in cases where it is not. However, it would be both wrong and unrealistic to expect any arm of the State to be as well-situated as a child's parents to 'assure the quality of home education.' For a number of years, local authority home education policies have been implying or claiming outright that they have a responsibility to monitor the quality of education provided, which does not in fact exist in law. The 2012 Select Committee report called on the DfE to put a stop to this. It is galling then, that eight years later, not only does this egregiously poor practice continue unabated, but the current Select Committee also appears to be bowing to campaigners by entertaining questions on a long-standing, settled and satisfactory legal position.

Analysis of data provided by local authorities has shown that home-educated children are disproportionately scrutinised by Social Services, while being substantially less likely to be made subject to a CPP than their schooled peers ([Home Education and the Safeguarding Myth](#) – Wendy Charles-Warner). I therefore find it enormously frustrating to witness the repeated weaponisation of 'safeguarding' by lobbyists who are calling for increased State monitoring. This is an outrageous denigration of committed, caring parents who are willing to take on their legal duty directly, instead of delegating it, and in so doing sacrifice income, career, lifestyle and time, as well as forgoing their right to have their children's education provided and paid for by the State.

The repeated use of the safeguarding phantasm also almost laughably ignores the fact (acknowledged in the 2019 DfE Guidance) that a number of parents now home-educate because of schools' failure to safeguard their children from bullying. This raises the suspicion that the monitoring lobbyists are less concerned for children's wellbeing than they are for total State control of education.

Statutory register of home-educated children

There is no evidence to suggest that such a statutory register would be of any help to children, so it would be a waste of resources to establish and maintain. It would create the impression that elective home education happens with the state's permission, and needs to be 'licensed.' This is runs contrary to the long-standing legal position in this country, and of my hundreds of contacts within the home-educating community I have not encountered an iota support for changing this.

Neither would the establishment of such a register assist local authorities in their duty of establishing the identities of children who are missing an education. No register of the children of law-abiding parents

will make any difference to finding the children of people who are determined to evade their legal responsibilities. It would, however, make the existing unwarranted and unjust stigmatisation of home-educating families even worse.

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

Case study 1:

My [age] daughter tells me that she really appreciates the freedom that home education gives her to pursue her interests, and learn at her own pace without the pressure of keeping up with the rest of a class in school. She has lots of friends, but since she does not see them every day, getting together with them is a particular treat, and she thinks that this really helps them value their relationships. She also enjoys being able to take exercise when everyone else has to be in school!

The disadvantages that she cites are knowing that many people have a negative prejudice against the form of education in which she is thriving. It disheartens her when someone in the media or a public body expresses suspicion about elective home education. That said, when she meets people who ask why she is not in school, she says that she is proud to tell them that she is home-educated.

Several years ago, our family was referred to social services, and in common with most home-educating families who undergo this, it did not result in a Child Protection Plan. However, the social workers' notes described our children as 'shy' and 'socially awkward.' As a result, two of them attended a group for children with a variety of difficulties, and the feedback from the staff who ran the group was precisely the opposite – that our children were outgoing, friendly, and modelled all kinds of helpful behaviour that benefited all the other children; their families commenting on the difference. In fact, they were reluctant to let our children go since they had seen such improvements in the group as a whole since they arrived!

This personal experience is just one example of institutional bias within public bodies against elective home education, that I have seen repeated time and time again in the testimony of other parents. It really does not help children when prejudice within local authorities means that their families are treated with suspicion in the absence of any evidence that they are not doing a good job.

Case study 2:

In the midst of his postponed IGCSE and A Level exams, my eldest son (aged [age]) was willing to take the time to share the benefits he sees in home education. He cherishes the flexibility that it has allowed him: to devote more time during the day to subjects he found more challenging, while not having to spend all of a pre-allocated timetable slot on work that he could accomplish more quickly. He also mentions greater possibilities for one-to-one study, as well as the opportunity to reinforce his own learning by helping his younger siblings with their work.

He points out that he has formed many multi-generational friendships, which he sees as better preparation for the adult world than being cemented within a group of his peers at school. Finally, he identifies the domestic skills in which he has been trained as being very much part of his overall education, that will equip him for responsible, independent adult life.

A major disadvantage encountered by our son is that of access to public exams, and from my contacts with many other parents, I know that this is a widespread problem. Up until 2019, a nearby independent school was willing to accept private candidates for exams, and did so at a reasonable cost. Last year, the exams officer changed, and shortly afterwards we were told that previous arrangement would cease. Our options became restricted to either paying nearly double at a commercial exam centre, or travelling a long distance to find a more affordable option. Fortunately for us, such an option does exist close to my parents' house

(90 miles away), so our son has been staying there for the last six weeks. However, the current situation is a real 'postcode lottery' for home-educated children, and is highly unsatisfactory.

Elective home-educating parents know that part of the 'deal' is that they have to cover all the costs associated with their child's education. I have experienced no particular appetite within the HE community for government funding of public exams. However, ensuring improved local access with affordable fees would be welcomed.

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 my experience, the majority of quality support for home educators and their children comes from within the home-educating community. The 2019 Departmental Guidance speaks of the benefits of establishing a positive relationship between the local authority and home-educating parent. Since all too often the local authority oversteps its legal remit, it is no surprise when positive relationships are not established.

Our own LA has generally a good policy on home education, however, the opening paragraph of a (presumably standard) letter that we received last month mis-states section 7, by claiming that it, rather than parents, has a duty to ensure that children receive an efficient full-time education. When local authorities persistently get the law wrong, small wonder that home-educating parents view offers of 'support' with scepticism.

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'

Regulatory framework:

Yes, the current regulatory framework is sufficient to ensure this. Local Authorities should make informal enquiries to satisfy themselves that a suitable education is provided. Where that appears not to be the case, LAs have powers to act.

The details of exactly what a suitable education looks like will depend upon the specific circumstances between parent and child in individual families. I would be extremely sceptical of any move to set some sort of external standard to judge the 'quality' of elective home education. This is because in the many other families of my acquaintance, I see education provided in extremely diverse ways, all of which are highly suitable to the ages, abilities and aptitudes of the children in receipt of that education.

Unregistered schools:

Children attending unregistered schools are not the same as those receiving elective home education. There is a different set of laws dealing with unregistered schools, making it clear that it is a criminal offence to operate one.

Exclusion and off-rolling:

Children who have been excluded from school or subjected to off-rolling are not in receipt of elective home education. Conflation of the two is extremely unhelpful.

The role that inspection should play in future regulation of home education

I would strongly oppose any move to introduce inspection to regulate elective home education. It would completely undermine the existing, satisfactory, legal settlement that parents are responsible for the education of their children. I would also oppose it on these practical grounds:

- Given the persistent overreach by the majority of local authorities (132 out of 152 were found to have EHE policies that did not fully comply with the law), they could rationally be predicted to abuse any additional powers that they might be given. At least as things stand, parents have some ability to shield their children from the threats and ultra vires demands made upon them by LA officials. If these people were granted a right of access into families' homes, then children would be exposed directly to the pressure and distress to which their parents are currently subjected.
- Local authority officials with school teaching, social work or truancy backgrounds are frequently already unable or unwilling to recognise that a suitable education can be provided via diverse valid means. Such people could be predicted to use their inspection powers to find suitable education unsuitable, and to demand changes that would in fact be less suitable to an individual child's age, ability and aptitude, as known best by his parents.

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 know of no improvements since the 2012 report. Reading through its recommendations, it is extremely disheartening to see that not one of them has been taken up.

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

In common with all of society, COVID restrictions have meant that home-educated children have experienced reduced in-person interactions with friends and extended family members. However, their learning has not been disrupted significantly, unlike their peers who normally go to school. The parents of children receiving emergency pandemic schooling at home have felt the pressure of trying to attain a school-style timetable and school-style standards without the training to do so, and often while also juggling continuing their employment at home. Elective home-educating parents have not been torn in this way. In the experience of my family, and others that I know, EHE has proved to be very resilient in the face of the pandemic.

One notable negative effect has been encountered by home-educated young people who were due to sit A Levels in the summer of 2020, and who had plans to proceed to university this autumn. No alternative means of assessment was provided, meaning that their only option was to accept the deferred sitting and delay their higher education plans.

November 2020