

Written evidence submitted by the National Network of Parent Carer Forums

Evidence to inform the Education Commons Select Committee Home Education (EHE) Inquiry

1 About the National Network of Parent Carer Forums

The National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF) is the independent, national voice of parent carer forums.

Our mission is to deliver better outcomes for families living with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). We aim to:

- create a culture of participation and co-production across the education, health, social care and the voluntary sectors. This means that we are involved in all aspects of designing, commissioning, delivering and reviewing services as an equal partner.
- empower our members to ensure that their voices are heard at a local, regional and national level
- inspire our partners by sharing good practice and knowledge.

Our vision is a for the best possible opportunities and futures for all children and young people with SEND and their families

Parent Carer Forums are pan disability. This means each Parent Carer Forum includes Parent Carers from a range of backgrounds with a wide range of experiences in Health, Education and Social Care as their children have a wide range of conditions. We currently have approaching 100,000 members.

2 Our Approach to this Inquiry

As a membership organisation, the NNPCF Steering Group has based this report on a range of sources including:

- Feedback from Forums through their regional networks to their Steering Group member.
- Feedback on our social media platforms.
- Key issues identified through direct conversations with parent carers at a local, regional and national level.
- A national survey of parent carer forums

3 Parent Carers Matter – The Wider Context

“EHE should always be a positive choice taken following a discussion between parents the school, and the LA about how the needs of the child might best be met. This is particularly important where vulnerable children, children in need, and those at greater risk of harm are involved.”¹

The NNPCF would ask that when considering the responses to this inquiry, the Education Select Committee seeks to understand and address not only the challenges faced by children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities due to Covid-19 but also the significant additional caring responsibilities that families face on a daily basis including worries about their child or young person’s health and wellbeing, education, SEN provision and schools during this pandemic.

The mental health and social care needs of SEND families are increasing during this time as both formal and informal support networks are reduced. We would like the Committee to consider the wider holistic impacts for family life. All families are faced with a challenging landscape including home schooling, financial pressures, illness and bereavement, however, when a SEND need is added the impact is exacerbated.

Please consider the wider family needs such as lack of respite for carers and siblings as well as loss of therapies for the child or young person with SEND on top of the need to home educate their child.

4. Our Key Issues

Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, many parent carers reported that they had been forced into a position where they had to home educate their children and young people with SEND. Home education is not elective for many or even a majority of home educated children and young people with SEND:

- A failure of schools and the local system to meet a child’s needs. Parents withdraw their children from schools and home educate because their concerns are not heard and the right support is not put in place to help them stay in school.
- Off rolling – many parents of children with SEND report that their children have been off-rolled.
- A disproportionate number of children with SEND have been excluded from schools. This is too often because the school and the local system has been unable or unwilling to put the right support in place to enable a child with SEND to participate in school

¹ Letter from Minister Ford to CYP with SEND, their families and carers, and those who work to support them - Sept 2020 <http://www.nnpcf.org.uk/letter-from-minister-ford-to-children-and-young-people-with-send-their-families-and-carers-and-those-who-work-to-support-them/>

life. The most recent government statistics reveal that children with SEND are 8 times more likely to be permanently excluded²

- Transition: where families do not get their choice of school or where they are awaiting results of appeals, some families may choose to home educate
- Bullying and Safeguarding concerns: children and young people with SEND are more likely to be subjected to bullying and if unresolved may result in families choosing to home educate.

The 2019 Children's Commissioner report into home education supports these findings³

The NNPCF surveyed our members regarding Elective Home Education in their Local Authority area.

The survey returns show that 82% of forums who responded to the survey said that the numbers of EHE requests for children and young people with SEN (EHC Plan and SEN Support) had increased in their local area during the Pandemic.

Forums advise that the main reasons for the rise in the number of home education requests are:

1. Parental fears about Covid 19, including shielding
2. Children responded well to home learning during lockdown and families want to continue (e.g. better learning, reduced anxiety)
3. Poor information about Elective Home Education. Some families believe that they can opt back into school when they feel ready
4. Lack of locally available provision to meet needs.

Forums have told us.

'No appropriate provision locally, parents being threatened with attendance fines unless they de-register, parents whose children have EOTAS plans being told this cannot continue and they need to move to EHE.'

'The local authority ignored the law about deregistration being actioned immediately and instructed schools that they weren't to remove a pupil from a register pending the outcome of a multiagency meeting...the LA Director of Education is happy that this strategy has resulted in some of the deregistration being stopped and children remaining in school (she believes school is best) and as such the overall number of deregistration that have gone ahead is lower this year than in previous years. But is this because of families having the issues in school addressed or because they have been given false information/mislead or felt threatened with the LA aggressive approach to EHE.'

² Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>

³

Other reasons cited by forums include:

The NNPCF are concerned that the process for a child attending a special school and a child attending a mainstream school differs regardless of whether a child has an EHC Plan or not. For a child attending a special school the Head Teacher must inform the LA and the LA must consider whether the elective home education is suitable before the child's name can be removed from the school roll and the EHC plan can be amended.

The NNPCF would like to see the same process for all children with SEND who are EHE regardless of the type of education provision they attend or whether they have an EHC plan or not.

4.1 Elective Home Education policies

71% of forums who responded to our survey said that their local area has an Elective Home Education policy; however, only 57% of those policies had a specific SEN element to it.

Forums are reporting that communication relating to EHE is confusing and there is a mixed picture in terms of the Information, Advice and Support being provided by Local Authorities.

Many families are unaware of or are being let down by weak Local Offers.

'EHE has been crossed out in our Local Offer'

The NNPCF strongly requests that it is a requirement for each Local Authority to have an EHE policy and that appropriate guidance about EHE which specifically relates to SEN/EHC Plans is published on the Local Offer.

4.2 Rise in Home Education requests and the Impact of Covid 19

'It has increased as some have found learning at home much better and some can't cope with all the changes and expected behaviours now in place. Some have chosen EHE to avoid off rolling and other.'

'Parents are not aware of their options'

'Devastating. Impacted the range and availability of HE events, due to the added pressure on parents who organise because of the Covid risk assessments, financial impact (because parents have to fund events, local authority doesn't fund any activities or events) and the restrictions on numbers and venues make many not viable.'

Those who are already home educated have found their options restricted and those whose children and young people have been educating at home think that the current 'state of support' from schools will continue if they opt for home education.

There is less choice regarding activities due to closures. More families are requiring peer support and trying to gain places on groups. Home education groups have been unable to meet in person, therefore reducing peer support and opportunities to socialise parents, carers and children and young people.

A key impact has been for children who were due to take GCSE's or A levels in summer 2020. As they were not in school, but learning from home or online, there was no independent assessment on which to base a grade. Many have to take exams this autumn or delay until next year. The exception to this is where students are tutored by a qualified teacher who was able to submit evidence to the exam board on behalf of the student.

Forums report that finding out the legal situation in changing restrictions is hard. However, the NNPCF are aware that some home educators work together across the country to find solutions.

1 Hart, 1 Mind, 1 Forum in Hartlepool has started some work on home education having seen an increase in parents exploring home education due to the fears of Covid-19. They ran online surveys recently as well as face to face sessions. Their Local Authority Home Education Officer is arranging meeting individual families to support. The forum is also looking at additional literature/communication to share with families around home education.

4.3 Support and Services

Home Educated group

Some SEND families who were already home educating prior to Covid 19 were told that their LA home education officer is still expecting full reporting on what child has been doing along with evidence. The parents' ability to do this at the present time is limited and they report feeling pressured into reporting within unrealistic timescales.

'Generally parents have to fight for their EHC review.'

Where a child has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and is home educated, it remains the Local Authority's duty to maintain the EHCP and review it annually to ensure that the child's needs are met. According to our survey, this is happening in only 39% of the Local Areas whose forum responded.

The NNPCF is calling for greater accountability to ensure that all children who have an EHC Plan and who are electively home educated receive their statutory annual review.

Financial or material support

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Forums report that the offer of financial or material support towards home education costs for children and young people with SEND is variable. Our survey results show that 57% of forums who responded stated that their Local Authority did not offer financial or material support towards home education costs.

'The LA attitude is you are on your own, even with an EHCP

In one Local Authority area, the PCF reports that the LA has refused to provide EHC needs assessments for home educated children, telling parents EHCP only available in school setting despite the law saying the LA must identify special educational needs. Parents have been refused an EHC Needs assessment for their child because they don't have the Plan Do Review documentation that schools/education settings use. This has led to a number of families taking cases to tribunal for refusal to assess.

The NNPCF would like to see greater clarity and accessibility around EHC needs assessments for the EHE SEND community.

However, some families have managed to get their children as Education Outside of/Other than at School (EOTAS). In these cases the parent has control of the funding and so is effectively home educating. However, funding can be time limited and subject to review.

Other forums advise that if a child or young person has an EHC plan with a personal budget; parents can request help with education costs, such as a specialist tutor and exam costs in order to meet the needs of the child or young person. If, however, the child or young person does not have an EHC plan then no financial support is available.

Often councils websites state that parents can electively home educate their child with a special educational need or disability but must do so at their own expense.

The NNPCF would like to see parity in offer for children and young people with an EHC Plan and those at SEN Support. E.g. help with curriculum, exam fees and access to facilities, support materials.

Health

The Health support for EHE children offer varies significantly between Local Areas and within Local Areas.

'This varies significantly. Speech and Language therapy and autism outreach do not offer any services to EHE families. Physiotherapy, Educational psychology and Occupational Therapy do.'

Our survey shows that only 43% of the forums who participated said that Local Authority and/or Clinical Commissioning group provide home educated children with access to standard health services such as Physiotherapy, OT, CAHMS or SALT.

Where Health services are available they include, but not limited to: CAMHS Community paediatrics, School age vaccinations via GP (requested by parents/carers), Speech and Language therapy Physiotherapy Community care packages, equipment to support mobility Occupational therapy and Neurodevelopmental assessments.

Forums report that where Health support is provided it is more difficult for families to access the support they to meet the needs of their child.

'Again, those that shout the loudest, though policy says all should have same access as those in school.'

The NNPCF ask for greater clarity and parity regarding all Health services. This is to minimise unnecessary anxiety through mixed messages or misunderstanding. We need clarified joined up guidance from the DfE and NHSE about the level of Health services that local areas are expected to provide for EHE children and young people.

The NNPCF would like to see the views of the Designated Clinical Officer (DCO) are sought by the Local Authority if a child or young person is being educated at home because of health needs or disability.

Transitions and Preparing for Adulthood

This is very complex and difficult for families to navigate through. Many forums are reporting that their Local Authorities have not provided any information, advice or guidance to EHE families to enable their young person to prepare key transitions and for adult life.

'It took 4 years of battling to get an educational psychology assessment as a result the child missed out on place at college at 14 and again at 16 as previous assessment was conducted when child was 4yrs old. They only agreed when reached critical stage of already transitioning to post 16, but the placement had already filled all their places, so the young person had to defer for a year.'

5 Coproduction

Research shows that coproduction can bring out positive solutions to the many difficulties faced by families caring for a child with SEND.

Parent Carers Forums have told us that their experience of coproduction during the Pandemic can differ both within their Local Authority and across local authorities and areas.

There appears to be a postcode lottery where some forums have had little or no contact from their LAs and/or CCGs.

We understand that coproduction can be difficult at the best of times however; it appears that some forums are not receiving information from their local authority or CCG to share with families whereas other forums experiences have been more positive.

We would like the Government to reinforce the message to Local Authorities and other partners on the need to co-produced solutions for home education and their response to the Covid 19 Pandemic more widely.

The NNPCF asks for greater clarity with all communications relating to home education. This is to minimise unnecessary anxiety through mixed messages or misunderstanding. We need clarified joined up guidance from the DfE and NHSE about the level of services that local areas are expected to provide.

Local areas must ensure that they are making joined up decisions in partnership with their parent carer forum across education, health and social care about which services they continue to provide and what additional services are required. These decisions must be made with an understanding on the impact this will have on the lives of families.

6. Our final messages

The NNPCF would request that Local Areas work in partnership with their local Parent Carer forum to discuss and agree local home education policy for children and young people with SEND.

Here are some examples of good practice:

Dorset Parent Carer Council (DPCC) is currently involved in co-production work with Dorset Council and home educated families to write an home education policy and develop an understanding of what an efficient home education might look like. DPCC is ensuring that families with a child with SEND are fairly represented in this process, and there is a focus on SEND within appropriate elements of this work.

Since March the PCF in Plymouth (Plymouth Parent Carer Voice) and the LA have met virtually either weekly or fortnightly. The plan is for this to continue as it provides opportunities to share concerns, opportunities and trends across the Local Area. During lockdown we jointly produced a survey for parent/carers with over 300 responses. The feedback received included home education queries and where the LA requested contacted the families directly. With consent from the family PPCV contacted the SEND service directly when they have heard from families that they are considering home education. We can then contact the families directly to offer advice and support. This is often quicker than waiting for schools to contact us. We are currently looking to streamline processes so that potential

home education requests are identified early and as such parents receive accurate information in a timely way so that they can plan and make informed decisions. PPCV will be part of this working group.

Parents and Carers Alliance MK (Milton Keynes) surveyed families in May 2020. One parent of a child, who was home educated before the lockdown, said she had not heard from the SEND team during the pandemic. This was fed back to the Head of SEND who then asked case workers to call families of home educated children. She said *“Many of the families really appreciated the call and there has been some further contact from families as a result. I’m really grateful your survey prompted us to do this work.”*

Before Covid Cheshire east parent carer forum organised an EHE information coffee morning to provide opportunity for families considering home education to find answers to their questions where the EHE officer, a representative of the local independent advocacy service, a former EHE person now at university and a home education and SEND parent spoke about the law and their experiences.

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