

Written evidence submitted by the Association of Elective Home
Education Professionals

24 March 2021

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chairman of the Commons Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

By email to Ed commons select committee
educom@parliament.uk

Dear Mr Halfon

Re Elective Home Education (EHE)

The Association of Elective Home Education Professionals (AEHEP) was created in 2014 to provide a support network for local authority officers to create, share, and disseminate good practice and critically to raise the profile of EHE. The continued rise in numbers of EHE, particularly heightened during the current COVID-19 pandemic, is good reason for us to reach out to share our thoughts on the future for EHE.

We believe that this neglected area of education is in need some long overdue changes to ensure both safeguarding and education.

Having watched the oral evidence for the inquiry with reference to Elective Home Education yesterday we felt it was important to contact you. Wendy Charles Warner Trustee of Education Otherwise stated her concerns about inconsistencies across England by Local Authorities. The DfE guidance for Local Authorities is not helpful as it states "5.3 There are no detailed legal requirements as to how such a system of oversight should work, and it is for each local authority to decide what it sees as necessary and proportionate to assure itself that every child is receiving a suitable education, or action is being taken to secure that outcome." We believe that just as there is framework for education in mainstream and independent schools there needs to be framework for children who are electively home educated. Indeed, such a framework would ensure LAs were all following the same procedures.

Wendy Charles Warner went on to state that she felt that one of the reasons for such inconsistencies was due to a lack of training for EHE professional officers about the law and home education practices. We are aware that LAs do support newly appointed staff to EHE roles however as a national organisation I am delighted to inform you that AEHEP are working very closely with the Professor of Law from Birkbeck University of London, Daniel Monk, who has been involved with Elective Home Education for a considerable number of years and has supported the majority of EHE officers about the law as EHE is an area of personal interest. As a result, Birkbeck University will be offering essential training for LA EHE professionals starting this autumn 2021. In light of Covid the training will be via remote learning. I

am sure that Daniel would be interested in attending one of the inquiry sessions regarding this nuanced area of education.

The number of EHE pupils has steadily risen as demonstrated by the ADCS annual survey in November 2020 to over 75,000, in 2016 the same survey estimated numbers at 37,500. The rise in numbers, doubling in 4 years, is not a concern in itself but the fact that this is an estimate and does not capture all EHE is a major concern. It might reasonably be inferred that most parents are providing an excellent education, although we cannot be certain as the current law and guidance does not empower LA's to really know. Certainly, lobby groups such as Education Otherwise, Education Freedom and others such as the Patriotic Alternative Campaign would project EHE as always providing an excellent education with local authorities being unreasonable and often giving advice on how to not engage with local authority officers.

Our concern as a group of professionals with direct experience of working with vulnerable children over many years is that COVID-19 has provided the impetus for a small but increasing number of children who need it most to lose the opportunity for education and for the protection which a school environment provides. It seems likely that the longer the situation continues it will be more difficult to reintegrate children into that environment. This is not a recent concern, but it has been exacerbated by the impact of schools being closed to all apart from the children of key workers and those who are vulnerable because of COVID19.

Every effort has been made by Local Authorities, schools and academies working together to maintain vulnerable children in education. However, it is increasingly clear that a combination of factors has led to a steep rise in numbers of children who are not likely to return to school soon, if ever. These factors are well documented and include fears about virus related safety, poverty, behavioural difficulties, off rolling and, regrettably, situations where parents/carers want to remove their children from any oversight by professionals for reasons which are harmful. There is a danger of creating mixed messages as the government are correctly worried about the amount of schooling lost by many pupils but the lack of effective oversight for EHE provides a very different message to the forgotten cohort of pupils who are EHE. You will understand schools play a vital role in helping to keep children safe as they are one of the only universal providers which see children daily for most of the year. In some areas the contact is also maintained throughout the year through Playschemes and other informal community-based activities. We have seen, as anticipated, a significant increase in referrals of school-aged children, many which have met the threshold for social care intervention.

The impact of inaction on this subject will be felt by children for many years to come, indeed the recent Children's Commissioner for Wales report on home schooling makes for similar reading around inaction. Before the pandemic occurred, you will be aware of Serious Case Reviews/Child Safeguarding Practice reviews where a child had died or been seriously harmed where home education has provided a cover for abuse and neglect. You will also be aware of recent publicity about children not in education who have been targeted and groomed by organised crime groups and have died because of being drawn into these gangs.

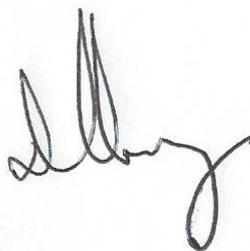
As safeguarding professionals, we are of the view that the current legislative framework and guidance does not give sufficient protection to the children in these situations. There is no legislation which provides the opportunity for routine oversight of whether a child is safe and well, indeed the opposite is true in that local authorities must prove that there is concern before we can make an approach to the family. When a child becomes EHE, the voice of that child is often lost, and some will experience little or no communication from anyone outside the home. We know from experience that neighbours and even family members can be reluctant to act despite having significant concerns. The voice that is heard is that of parents and lobby groups and whilst the vast majority will be perfectly reasonable a minority will be the opposite.

It is now apparent from our work looking at the profile of children who are EHE that there is a growing number of vulnerable families who are choosing this route to avoid sending their children to school. This includes families where children are known to be CIN or CP who are requesting that their child is removed from a school roll. I am sure that you will share our concern as we are very worried about the lack of visibility that these children will have as they will no longer have school as a protective factor in their daily lives. A home visit once or twice a year, where parents can refuse sight of the child or not allow an officer to meet the child is not safe or conducive to understanding the child's viewpoint. This will also have a long-term effect as children born into these families in the future will probably not be enrolled in school and that invisibility will stretch into the next generation.

I am writing on behalf of the AEHEP to ask for your support in strengthening the legislation to provide further safeguards for children who are EHE. This is both in respect of their welfare and safety, and in terms of the educational attainment which they are expected to achieve whilst at home. This together with definitive criteria for suitable education would be very much welcomed. Children have missed out in so many ways during 2020. If urgent action is not taken to raise the expectations about children who are EHE many of the most vulnerable children in the country will miss out for the rest of their lives, as well as those for whom the consequences are much more serious.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dave Harvey', with a stylized, cursive script.

Dave Harvey

Chairman AEHEP

April 2021