

Written evidence submitted by Mrs Jaki Parsons

WHO WE ARE - We are an experienced Home Educating family, daughter has never attended school. I have invigilated during the exam process in a school, at an Exam Centre and in a private home. I have tutored groups of students to GCSE level and volunteered at FareGos Exam Centre for a few years in Hampshire

WHERE WE ARE - up until our daughter Bella was 16 we were based in Hampshire so used the fantastic FareGos provision. An exam centre run by, and for, Home Educators. Bella took exams from age 14 - 16 years and gained an

8 in English Language.

A in Religious Studies

B in English Literature

Ci in Drama

D in Maths

Daughter is dyscalculic - Maths is a major struggle, not for the want of trying really really hard to pass the maths exam. For her third attempt at IGCSE Maths, not only did she have a lesson each week for almost three years, she had a private lesson every single day for the last few weeks leading up the exam., including Christmas day. At any odd times her excellent tutor was available - so her lessons varied from 5am to 9pm.

She did almost 40 past papers - utilising all the exam boards over the past dozen or so years.

She still didnt get a passing grade despite all her best efforts.

After the summer exam season we moved to Devon.

The local college - Exeter - refused to accept Functional Skills in lieu of her maths grade. We had offered to pay for a fast track course - several hundred pounds - but they were adamant that it was not an equivalent qualification.

We were exam'd out by this time so took a year out to consider options.

At age 17 a different College agreed to accept her onto the Engineering Apprenticeship course. The deal was we would privately organise another attempt at passing the maths exam. Their in-house tutor for maths was not only dire but had zero experience of tutoring anyone with dyscalcula.

THE SITUATION PRE EXAM - We had arranged for her to have some volunteer experience running from September to December that would enhance her employment prospects whilst she started her College course so opted for the summer 2020 exam rseason ather than the January 2020 one

I contacted a local training provider who had agreed to let her sit the exam in the summer and would give her extra time as per her previous exams. Less than 24 hours before the exam entry deadline, the centre changed their mind about accepting any students that they were not tutoring and cancelled our exam entry.

Thankfully there was a Plan B in place so an email and a bankers draft for £200 was despatched to a new school the next day. No extra time as it was too late to arrange. Was just grateful they accepted us. This was the cost of the exam, the admin, the invigilation, despite the fact that the schooled students were taking the same subject and Bella would just be sat at the back of the hall. But we were out of options.

THE SITUATION AT EXAM TIME - When Covid19 hit and varying proposals were put forward Home Educators were hung out to dry. The phrase - every child will have a result to carry forward only really applied to those in schools, or those who were utilising tutors or online providers or those who could afford the - sometimes - extortionate extra costs that were levied at the last minute.

The Exam Officer at the school initially did not respond to any emails for weeks whilst we were trying to find out what options, if any, we had. We were left in limbo, having no idea if Bella was still entered for the exam, what the process would be for her, if indeed, there was one. If we could get our money back if negotiations failed.

Any and all information that came from various exam bodies was either too little too late or contradictory from one department to another. No one had a clue what was going on - including the exam boards.

Eventually communication was resumed. Not only was she the Exam Officer but also a Head of year with two different subjects that she was now trying to help her schooled pupils get through by second guessing their grades.

All private candidates entered by the school had their exam entries cancelled. With the best will in the world, the Exam Officer had never met Bella, couldnt identify her at 20 paces so couldnt possibly include her in the schooled cohort. Certainly not include an unknown entity in the ranking system The school had no relationship with her maths tutor, as we had only just engaged her for the final term before the exam and Bella had only had 3 lessons and to date had done no full mock exams under timed conditions.

We hung on for weeks waiting to see what the governments proposal was. It appeared as if we had been forgotten. Despite emails sent to various official bodies, exam boards, Ofqual, MP's etc and completing a fair number of consultations, that I doubt anyone will read, we are stuck.

THE SITUATION POST SUMMER EXAMS - We have been able to transfer entry to the excellent FareGos exam centre as I had a previous relationship with them - for an autumn exam at some indeterminate time that no one knows yet - at a cost that we dont know yet as no one is actually working from the office at the moment. Covid19 and all that

We have yet to receive a refund of the exam entry we have already made and paid for over four months ago. All staff working from home still so no refunds available until they return.

The school made it clear they would not be offering autumn exams for anyone, schooled pupils or private candidates, despite the fact that they usually do. The Head said they cannot plan for an exam when no one actually knows when, or if, it will take place and what subjects will be on offer. He has a school to run.

SO WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US - A daughter who will be almost 19 when she retakes her maths exam for the fourth time in an attempt to get the magic passing grade. This does mean two overnight stays as FareGos is over 200 miles from us but the only centre that would take us on. So yet more financial expense.

Her engineering course in College somehow has to cram in five months worth of practical engineering classes in about 8 weeks. From the start of the new term in September assuming they will be open for business then, not confirmed as yet.

Part of the final exam for the first year students is a written exam paper based on their practical learning so far. Except they havent finished the syllabus yet.

So in September, not only will her hours in College drastically increase to try and catch up on the learning and practical hands on knowledge she has missed, she will be revising for an exam that may or may not be taken in November.

Plus of course she is in full time employment, day release for College. She will have to be in College for a minimum of two days per week now to catch up, meaning a financial penalty for her employer, and we have to get agreement that they will release her for this extra time.

Part of her Apprenticeship is that she passes her maths exam. Not only is she dyscalculic, she has memory recall issues, slow processing, hence allowing extra time in her previous exams and she also has fibromyalgia which all have an impact

The whole uncertainty around if the exams are on - or off - whether she can take them - or not - is bad for her health as prolonged stress and uncertainty can bring on a flare up of her fibromyalgia, She can dip in energy levels so quickly it is not even possible to pick up a pen. Hence why planning for any event involving stress - and exams are always stressful! - has to be undertaken with military precision.

Starting with the fundamentals - ie - what date are the exams? As that has still not been fixed, trying to revise for an exam that will take place somewhere on an indeterminate date sometime in the future is proving challenging to say the least.

If they are sending young primary children into school then surely it would have made much more sense to have just had years 10/11 in school and no one else. They are old enough to understand social distancing, could have completed their revision and mocks and all students could have taken their exams in the summer - even if the start date was delayed until mid June or end July

So we are left to fund the exams again - we may or may not get our money back from the first school in time to pay for the revised date of the exam.

To cram for a maths exam on top of cramming for the end of year tests for her Engineering Apprenticeship as well as starting the second year of her course at the same time may well be an overload.

Personally Bella is hoping to time out of sitting her maths exam as she will be almost 19 by the time they finally sit.

June 2020