

Education Select Committee 2020 inquiry on Home Education

A response from the Special Educational Consortium

The Special Educational Consortium (SEC) is a membership organisation that comes together to protect and promote the rights of disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN). Our membership includes the voluntary and community sector, education providers and professional associations. SEC believes that every child and young person is entitled to an education that allows them to fulfil their potential and achieve their aspirations.

SEC identifies areas of consensus across our membership and works with the Department for Education, Parliament, and other decision-makers when there are proposals for changes in policy, legislation, regulations and guidance that may affect disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Our membership includes nationally recognised experts on issues including assessment and curriculum, schools and high needs funding, the SEN legal framework, exclusions and alternative provision.

Introduction

SEC respects parents and carers' right to home educate and to provide a suitable education in a way they see fit, including for those with SEN. SEC also believes most home educating parents and carers do a good job and does not wish to criticise those parents. Rather SEC wants to highlight those children, especially those with SEN, who are more vulnerable but potentially unidentified. It is important to examine how these children can be supported.

There is a clear rise in home education (LGA 2018, Ofsted 2019), and this should be looked as part of a wider trend of children falling out of mainstream school. This includes rising exclusions

and a rising numbers of children in special schools. In addition some children, including those with SEN, are being home educated due to informal exclusions, coercion from schools to home educate, or due to schools or alternative provision being unable to meet children's needs. It is vital that home education, especially for children with SEN, should be a positive choice for parents rather than as a result of the education system not meeting their needs.

The Decision to Educate at Home

Part of any ongoing process must include the suitable and accurate provision of statutory information – both at a national and a local level. At present a family electively home educating does not have to demonstrate their knowledgeable consent or evidence that they have been provided with information to inform that decision. If this is going to be a proper, autonomous decision it needs objective and accurate statutory information to support the decision making process.

This information must also include the clear distinction between the 'push and pull' factors regarding home education – 'Push' factors may be that a school is not meeting a child's needs (or threatening exclusion), the 'pull' could be the philosophical view of the parents around home education. Although where a school is considered not to be meeting a child's needs the response of home education should not be considered without further scrutiny of why it may be considered that these needs are not being met, and what the school (and LA) could put in place to support these needs (with a similar process applied for any child who is deemed at risk of exclusion). Consideration also needs to be made for the child's voice during any decision making process, with the possible need of some form of adjudication/mediating when a parent and child have different views.

Parents also need to have a clear understanding regarding the difference between 'education otherwise' and Elective Home Education, in particular the key issue that one allows a child or young person to have an EHC Plan and the other doesn't. There is a great concern that parents

might, unknowingly, be waiving their rights to LA support if they don't understand the difference.

Where there are issues around delays in decision making on support, provision and/or placement (or delays because such a decision is being disputed), children can often end up being without any formal education for long periods in time – this is a forced situation placed on the family and should not be considered a valid reason, in itself, for a 'classification' of a child being home educated.

Duties of the Local Authority

SEC is in favour of all children who are home educated, including those with SEN, being registered with the local authority. There should be a statutory duty for any parent or carer who electively home educates their child to register with the local authority. An effective, clear and simple registration could help ensure all children are safe, and receiving their entitlement to suitable education. This would include helping identify home educated children with SEN, so they can receive sign posting and support where necessary.

In addition, effective monitoring of children with SEN who are home educated, could help ensure they are receiving their entitlement to education, and are supported to have their special educational needs met – for both children with an EHCP, and those without.

The duty for local authorities to monitor home education should be given appropriate powers, and must be adequately resourced, especially where this leads to additional support and provision. Monitoring should also not interfere with parents and carers right to provide a suitable education, including for children with SEN, in the way they see fit.

Part of the oversight provided by a LA should include resources and methods of sharing information and providing advice on home schooling. This could include:

- Direct advice and support from LA officers about education and social matters such as the local offer, financial support for children with SEN, support and resources for children with SEN but without an EHCP
- Creating spaces in local areas for parents and children to meet and support one another
- Facilitation of effective liaison between schools and other education services with the aim of monitoring and supporting children
- Support on exam processes, including help, where appropriate, to access registered exam centres for pupils who are being home educated

From recent experiences of learning during periods of lockdown during the Covid pandemic we need to review the benefits of virtual learning at home and using a range of methods and technologies. Locally and nationally there is a need to develop plans to support learning at home and reap the benefits of new approaches for children whose parents have actively chosen to educate them at home. It is vital that children educated at home should have access to appropriate technology to learn, including advice and support from specialists on using this technology.

National Responsibilities

There is already a over representation of SEND and other vulnerable groups being home educated. In order to ensure the national picture of children being educated at home is being monitored and assessed the Department of Education needs to track trends in home education – how many children are leaving school to be home educated each year, what are their reasons for doing this? What are the trends, spikes, characteristics etc. This information needs to be analysed annually with responses to any issues of concern emerging from the data.

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November 2020