



The home education charity
educationotherwise.org

Home Education Trends, Preliminary Report



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Welcome to our preliminary report on trends in home education.

2020 has been an interesting year for home educating families, as Covid 19 has changed their normality, just as it has for every other family. However, for home educating families, this is to a lesser degree as school closures do not affect them.

When school closures were announced, we saw an immediate turmoil amongst families of school children who were suddenly tasked with delivering school supplied provision at home. Home educating families rallied to support those families with advice, assistance and signposting to suitable resources. More poignantly, home educating families tell us that they hoped that these new experiences for all parents, would lead to greater understanding of the benefits of home education and the truth behind its myths.

We have all witnessed the rising tide of media reporting, with stories emerging of those who found being able to dip their toes in the home education waters a positive and welcome experience and those who were overwhelmed by the extra workload they had to carry.

As the year went on, we saw reports emerging of Ministers and public bodies expressing concern about increased numbers of home educating parents. Calls were renewed for registration and monitoring of home educated children and once again we heard talk of lack of information about children who are home educated.

This preliminary report is being released in advance of our final data collection in early 2021, due to the Education Select Committee's Inquiry into home education, which was opened on 30th September 2020¹.

The data is available, the facts and figures can be provided and this report sets out to make some of this information available.



Wendy Charles-Warner
Education Otherwise

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/620/home-education/>

Executive summary

The Education Select Committee recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Education², to reiterate their view that registration of home educated children must be introduced and that data in respect of home educated children is not available. We examine the availability of accurate home education finding that:

- Data was collated from all 151 local authorities in England, providing an exceptional degree of accuracy.
- 38% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children. These parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school.
- The most commonly cited reason for choosing to home educate a child, was that home education provides a better education than school, at 20.74%.
- 12.82% of parents cited health needs, including the child's mental health, as their reason for choosing to home educate.
- On 1st October 2020 there were 69,791 home educated children known to their local authorities, considerably fewer than in reports published by public bodies.
- 94.75% of parents reported that their children were known to their local authorities.
- Covid 19 has given parents the opportunity to dip their toes in the waters of home education. Some fears of school return remain.
- The recent apparent rise in numbers of home educated children is able to be explained, in part, by previously unknown children becoming known and by multiple recording of children across local authorities.

We conclude that accurate data is available, but much published data is inaccurate, due in part to lack of access by researchers to home educating parents.

This report opens the way for fact based dialogue between home education stakeholders and we welcome that dialogue.

² Robert Halfon MP Chair of the Education Committee, (December 2020) Letter to Gavin Williamson CBE MP Secretary of State for Education. [Online] Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/620/home-education/publications/3/correspondence/>

The background

Home education has always been and remains a legal choice for parents in England and Wales, a choice which is of equal legal status to school education.

The Education Act 1996 s7

*The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—
(a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
(b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise’.*

Successive proposals have been made in recent years to introduce registration and monitoring of home educated children, on the basis that they are at safeguarding risk. These calls for close oversight continue to use the suggestion that these children are ‘invisible’, or ‘unseen’, to make them our modern day ‘Folk Devils’ of Cohen’s seminal work³. Home educating families attribute this to a process of ‘othering’, which leads to stigmatisation and feelings of inequity. Conroy⁴ attributes this process to ‘*social anxieties and the effects of populism*’, but amongst home educating families a sense of professional ‘gaslighting’ and institutional confirmation bias pervades.

On 2 April 2019, the Government launched a consultation entitled ‘*Children not in School*’ which ran to 24 June 2019. This consultation questioned the introduction of a mandatory register for home educated children, which would place a duty upon parents to register their children with their local authority. The submissions to this consultation and its final report are yet to be published. However, a short overview⁵ was published in December 2020, which confirms that the majority of the 5,000 responses to the consultation were from individuals. The overview is contradictory in that it refers to the purpose of the proposed register being to allow local authorities to address ‘safeguarding concerns’, whilst also stating the purpose to be to offer ‘support’ to home educating families. No indication of what this ‘support’ would comprise is given:

³ Cohen, S (1972) ‘Folk Devils and Moral Panics’. [Online] Available from:

https://infodocks.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/stanley_cohen_folk_devils_and_moral_panics.pdf

⁴ Conroy, J.C. (2010) ‘The State, Parenting, and the Populist Energies of Anxiety’. *Educational Theory*, 60(3,) p. 325-340. [Online] Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2010.00361.x>

⁵ DfE (2020) ‘Department for Education: Submission of Evidence for Education Select Committee inquiry into Home Education (2020)’ DfE [Online] Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/18392/html?fbclid=IwAR3Qadm44JMCIdEbeNfSZqSreaus9MOu73eO7XOtU6U_3QIAT-tN8dBfDak

'the difficulty that was often cited to the Department by local authority officials was that they did not know who the home educated children were, which in turn led to safeguarding concerns. It is those issues that would be addressed by the establishment of a register'.

'To support parents and children who may be considering, or have already withdrawn their child from school for, elective home education, we remain committed to a registration system for children not in school'.

What is argued by home educating families and is clear from this publication, is that the Government always intended to introduce a register for home educated children, regardless of the submissions it received to its various consultations. These home educating families point to the title of the consultation, '*Children not in School*' to argue that this indicates that an institutionally negative attitude is held by Government in respect of home education. These are children who are **in home education**, rather than children who are '*not in school*'. Despite the Education Act 1996 s7 making clear that home education is of equal legal status to school education, no public body would describe school children as '*children not in home education*'. This is often an unconscious bias, but one which leads home educating families to lose trust in public bodies.

On 30th September 2020 the Education Select Committee launched an inquiry into home education. The committee received in excess of 1,100 responses to the inquiry, primarily from home educating families, advocates, groups and charities. It is indicative of the strength of feeling on the subject of home education, that this is double the number of responses received to the inquiry into the tragedy at the Grenfell Tower⁶.

The inquiry chair, Robert Halfon MP created a controversy when he appeared on the Radio 4 'Today' programme,⁷ prior to consideration of the inquiry submissions, to state:

'What I think needs to happen, first of all there should be a national register, there should be data collected by the department for education so not only do we know for sure how many children are being home educated, we can look at their attainment and progress. We know that something like 40 children are excluded every day in our classrooms, hundreds of children are informally excluded, off-rolled and we don't know what happens to those children.'

⁶ <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000pfc9>

Whether they're getting a good education. I think there should be some form of inspection, as to how these children are being educated. Whether or not they are linked to a school, whether or not it's the LA, we have to remember Ofsted goes into schools, yet we don't know the attainment levels of children who are educated at home. We need accountability, we need transparency, we need the data, we need a proper inspection regime, to make sure that these children are getting the best learning they should have.'

This controversy was later exacerbated by Mr Halfon writing to Gavin Williamson CBE MP Secretary of State for Education⁸, to reiterate his view that registration of home educated children must be introduced and to state that:

'The Department does not collect statistics on the number of children in home education. Without this data, gaps in our understanding of the attainment and outcomes for the full range of children educated at home remain'.

Data is available in the form of an annual report from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)⁹ and in 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA)¹⁰ published its own report on children missing education, including a significant proportion of home educated children in that description. Home educating families raised significant concern in respect of the reliability of the data in both of these reports, not least because of the apparent bias in the data being provided by local authorities and not by the relevant cohort; home educating parents themselves. Notwithstanding clear inaccuracies within this report, this is the data relied upon by the DfE in its published review of its consultation on *'Children not in School'*.

It has become apparent that a balance needs to be struck between competing interests of the wish to obtain data on the part of Government and local authorities; the need for accuracy of any such data which is collected and the deep seated resistance to registration on the part of home educating families.

This report not only provides accurate and relevant information direct from source, but also examines the views of families and the basis for them holding those views.

⁸ Robert Halfon MP Chair of the Education Committee, (December 2020) Letter to Gavin Williamson CBE MP Secretary of State for Education. [Online] Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/620/home-education/publications/3/correspondence/>

⁹ ADCS (2020) 'Elective Home Education Survey 2020' ADCS. [Online] Available from <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2020>

¹⁰ LGA (2020) 'https://local.gov.uk/children-missing-education'. LGA. [Online] Available from: <https://local.gov.uk/children-missing-education>

Method

This report examines trends in numbers of home educating families in England. This data was obtained by sending freedom of information requests to each of the 151 local authorities in England. Each request was followed up in 2020 and 2019 in order to obtain a 100% response rate. The rationale for this, is that the wide range of local authority population sizes results in a wide range of numbers of home educating children across local authorities, making extrapolation from a sample population unreliable and misleading. All outliers were rechecked to ensure accuracy.

Data for previous years is taken from annual freedom of information collated by the researcher. Prior to 2019, full follow up to obtain 100% response rate was not always undertaken. Where data is missing in these years for an individual local authority, the number for the nearest available year is substituted in order to obtain the most reliable available figure.

In order to assess the proportion of home educated children who are known to their local authority and those who are not, a survey of home educating parents was undertaken across a mix of home education groups with different approaches. The first 1300 responses were recorded (Annex A).

On 1st July 2020 a survey was undertaken across a mix of home education groups to ascertain the main reason why home educating parents, who had been home educating their children prior to Covid 19, had chosen to home educate their children. During the second and third weeks in September, a second survey was undertaken across the same home education groups, of only those parents coming new to home education since July 2020. The survey was repeated during the last week of November and the first week of December, for only those parents who started to home educate their children after September 2020. The child's age was asked in each survey. As the three surveys received different numbers of responses, the lowest number being slightly over 550, responses were counted from the first 550 respondents to each survey in order to create a fair comparison.

Reasons for home education

The Elective Home Education Departmental Guidance for Local Authorities (EHEGLA)¹¹ cites reasons why parents elect to home educate their children, but we

¹¹ DfE (2019) Elective Home Education Departmental Guidance for Local Authorities [Online] available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education>

question whether these reflect DfE confirmation bias, rather than the actual reasons given by parents. The survey undertaken for this research used the listed reasons in the EHEDGLA, which include: *'Familial reasons which have nothing to do with schools or education (eg using older children educated at home as carers)'*, but found that of the 1,650 parents asked to give their main reason, none stated that the child was a carer as their reason for home educating the child. Anecdotally, administrators of home education support groups confirm that this is not a reason cited by parents. In view of this, we have omitted this reason from the report.

The ADCS survey¹² uses data reported by local authorities, who in turn are reporting data reported to them by parents. This survey also asked for the three main reasons why parents have chosen to home educate their child, leading to inaccuracy in findings as a result of parents providing between 1 and 3 reasons. Home educating individuals are also less trusting of their local authorities than they are of home education organisations¹³, rendering them less likely to disclose reasons which they may not wish to share. This report does not suffer from that bias. It is also of note that the ADCS report includes categories for avoiding legal action and avoiding school exclusion. None of the 1,650 respondents to our survey cited avoiding exclusion as a reason and only one respondent cited avoiding fines. Again, this indicates a possible search for confirmation bias on the part of the ADCS.

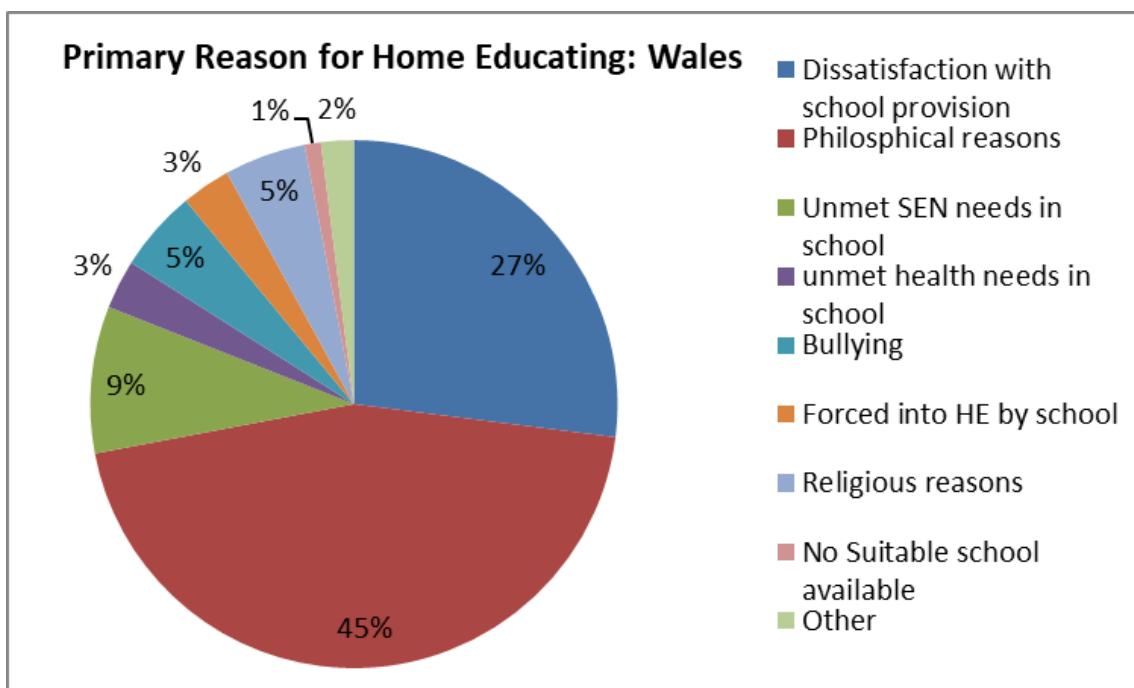


Fig 1: Cheaseley, S. 'Comparative Analysis of Home Education in Eight Local Authorities and Nationally'

¹² See 8.

¹³ Cheaseley, S. (2018) 'Comparative Analysis of Home Education in Eight Local Authorities and Nationally' [Online] Available from: <https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/2018/08/28/comparative-analysis-home-education-eight-local-authorities-nationally-preliminary-report/he-survey-final-2/>

A 2018 survey by Cheeseley¹⁴ found that 84% of respondents nationally gave the primary reason for home educating the child as dissatisfaction with school provision, including dissatisfaction with special needs provision, or philosophical reasons (fig:1). Notwithstanding, it is off rolling (the practice of a school coercing a parent to remove their child from the school roll) that exercises Government, the ADCS and local authorities alike. We found that only 8 parents (0.48%) cited off rolling as a main reason for home educating their child.

Religious and cultural beliefs are cited as reasons by the DfE, which feeds into fears of radicalisation¹⁵. This research found that only 5 parents (0.3%) cited religious reasons for home educating their children, two of whom referred to the provision of sex education in schools conflicting with their beliefs.

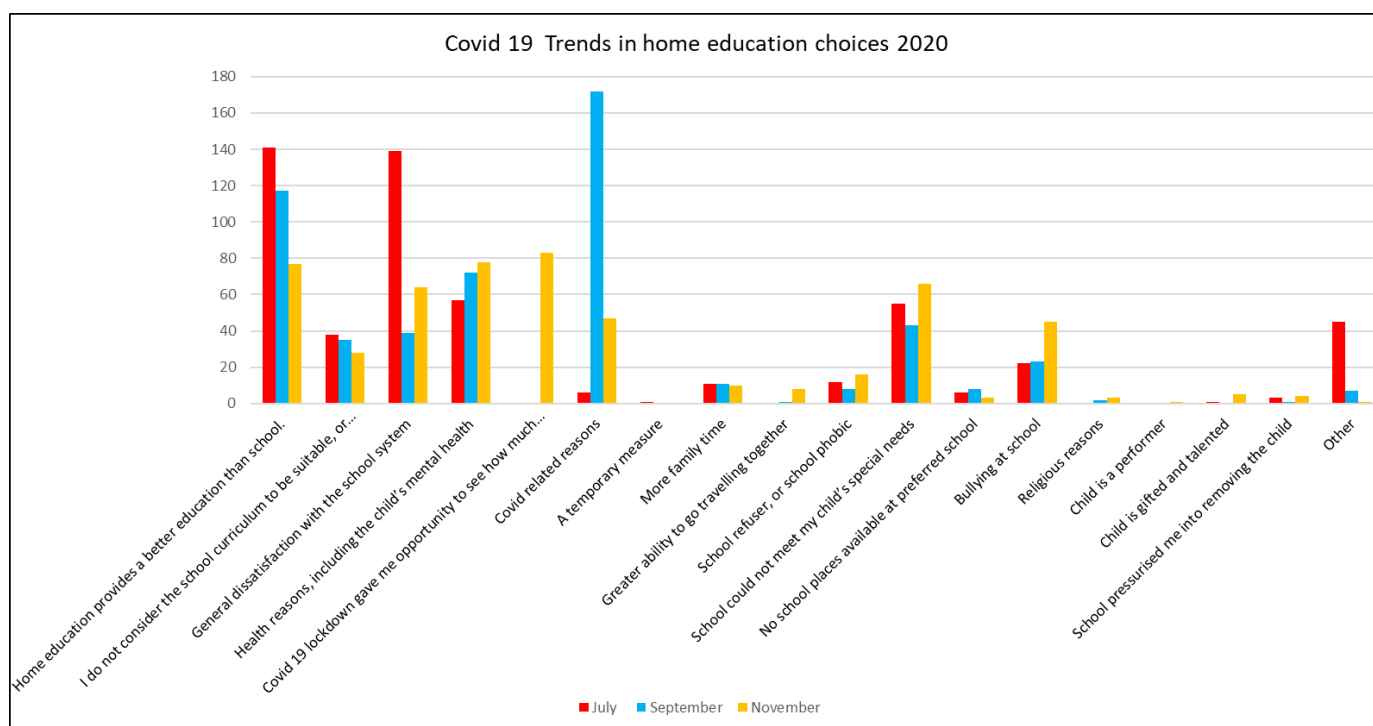


Fig 2: Parents' main reason for home educating their child.

Across the three surveys, 38% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children. This included that the parent felt the school curriculum to not be suitable, or relevant (6.25%), general dissatisfaction with the school system (14.98%), the school being unable to meet the

¹⁴ See 12.

¹⁵ Charles-Warner, W. (2018) 'Radicalisation of Home Educated Children, Reality or Myth' CPE [Online] Available from: <https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/2018/06/12/radicalisation-home-education-reality-myth/>

child's special needs (10.15%), lack of school places (1.05%) and bullying at school (5.57%). These parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school, particularly for special needs children being '*ignored*', being physically restrained, being bullied, or not having staff available to assist with eating or toileting. It is this category and bullying upon which parents provided commentary most frequently.

'My child was so anxious at school that she stopped eating; I saw her change from a happy girl into a shadow'.

'My son was stabbed and spent time in intensive care and the school tried to brush over it'.

'The school did nothing to protect (child), but were very proud of the bullying policy they always ignored'.

'My son came home each day with dried faeces in a sodden incontinence pad, he was sore, crying and unable to express himself well enough to obtain help'.

'My daughter was teased and embarrassed because of developing breasts, boys would grope her and she was sexually assaulted regularly. The school blamed her for wearing the wrong type of bra'.

'(child) spent 3 years in school and made no progress, his needs were ignored because we had no diagnosis. It has taken years to get one, but his progress has been amazing since he became home educated'.

The most commonly cited reason for choosing to home educate a child, was that home education provides a better education than school (20.74%). There were notable differences in numbers making this response by age, with the start of compulsory school age being the most usual time for this reason to be cited and a further rise seen at the point of transition into senior school (Fig:3).

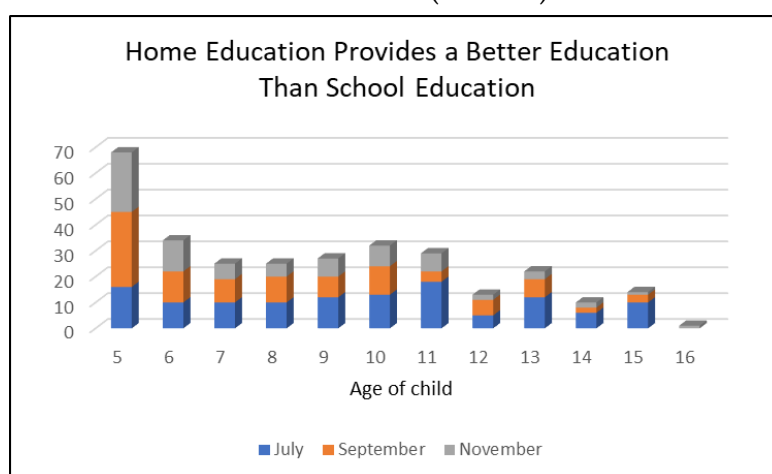


Fig 3: Home education is better than school education, by age.

12.82% of parents cited health needs, including the child's mental health as their reason for choosing to home educate. It was notable that the July cohort of established home educating parents were significantly less likely to cite this as a reason at 10.36%, than were the September and November cohorts at 13.64%. This is not explained by increased anxiety in children during the Covid 19 pandemic, as separate questions were asked in respect of this. Some parents clarified their health concerns and it was notable that these were primarily related to anxiety and children's mental health, usually amongst older children. This confirms the findings of the Children's Society¹⁶ which compared children's well-being in the UK with other European countries and found that:

'the UK had the largest drop in mean life satisfaction between 2015 and 2018 of the 21 comparable countries with data at both time points'.

'Children's happiness with life has been in decline for most of the last decade and this year is no exception. Worries about relationships with friends, appearance and school seem to be key factors. Even before the pandemic, 15-year-olds in the UK were among the saddest and least satisfied with their lives in Europe. It is time to listen to what young people need'.

Taking the 38% of parents who referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children, together with this high level of concern for children's mental health, home educating families would argue that very often, their decision to home educate is listening to their children where Government and local authorities do not do so.

Covid 19 related reasons were surveyed, finding a significant number of parents who came newly to home education because of Covid 19 in the September survey, at 31.27% of that cohort. Only a minority of these parents told us the nature of their specific concerns, however, those that did referred mainly to concerns for elderly or vulnerable relatives living in the same household as the child. Despite Government and school efforts to persuade parents that schools were safe for children to return to, some parents remain unpersuaded, with one respondent telling us:

'The school kept telling me that it was safe for my children to attend, even though their dad had just died from Covid. It was cruel'.

During this survey, it became apparent that the term 'Covid 19 reasons' was being interpreted by families as including those for whom lockdown had allowed them to

¹⁶ The Children's Society (2019) 'the good Childhood Report'. [Online] Available from: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

dip their toes into the home education waters and to discover how much better their child thrived than at school. Consequently, an additional survey choice was added for the November cohort of: '*Covid 19 lockdown gave me opportunity to see how much my child thrived learning at home*'. The results from this cohort were very clear with 83 parents (15.09%) citing this as a reason, compared to 46 parents (5.46%) who gave concerns relating to Covid 19 as their main reason.

Amongst those parents who are not reassured by Government and school arrangements for Covid 19 in schools, we heard dismay at fines being threatened, or levied against them, refusal of schools to provide work for the most clinically vulnerable children and lack of trust in the use of 'bubbles' comprising at times, of exceptionally large numbers of children. These parents expressed resentment at the use of punitive tactics to seek to ensure school attendance and this appeared to be the last straw that pushed them to choose to home educate.

Home educating families state that they have for many years asked that local authorities and Government look to improving their relationships with those parents and refrain from using punitive actions against them, but to no avail. Local authorities and public bodies argue for the necessity of registration and monitoring¹⁷, whilst these parents argue that these bodies continue to use the same tactics, regardless of it being increasingly clear that they do not work.

How many home educated children are there?

This report does not seek to examine the rationale for Government and public bodies seeking to introduce mandatory registration and monitoring of home educated children, partly upon the basis of purported rising number. We seek only to present data that is accurate and informative.

Inaccurate figures for home educating children are used by the media to seek to create concerns amongst the public. This was particularly notable in the recent BBC4 broadcast¹⁸ in which the presenter referred to a '**200% rise**' in numbers of home educated children. This programme followed the publication of a report by the Local Government Association (LGA) which extrapolated the meaning of '*children missing education*' to mean children not in receipt of full time and '*formal*' education, to arrive at a figure for that cohort of between 282,000 and 1.1 million children. There is no legal requirement for children to be in receipt of

¹⁷ See 4 and 7 above.

¹⁸ BBC 4 (2020) Today. [Online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000pfc9>

'formal' education. The data collection and analysis for the LGA report also does not stand up to scrutiny, not least because it variously cites the number of children missing education as 244,000 (Fig 4), adding the figures in the diagram arrives at a total of 274,000 and the figure is later cited as 282,000 (page 26). We have not analysed the report data relating to aspects other than those concerned with home educated children, but it is clear that the data in respect of those children is unreliable. The report arrived at its figure of numbers of home educated children not in receipt of a suitable education on the basis of little more than supposition:

'For the purposes of this analysis we have assumed that 75% of the additional children being electively home educated, from a baseline of 2014-15 are those who will be missing out on a formal full-time education'.

To suggest that 100% of home educated children in 2014 were in receipt of a suitable education, but that 75% of those children who commenced home education after that point are not, is simply not tenable. Consequently, the LGA report cannot be relied upon and was not considered further for this research.

The ADCS¹⁹ reports that there are 75,688 home educated children in England, but the methodology used to arrive at this figure is questionable. It is important to note that this figure was arrived at by taking a mean from 133 local authorities who responded to the ADCS enquiry and using that mean to extrapolate the figure for the remaining local authorities.

This extrapolation takes no account of regional differences and uses a raw mean of 501 per local authority. It is our experience that the smaller local authorities are less reliable in responding to requests for information, possibly due to staffing difficulties and that appears to be borne out in the ADCS report. The mean figure is not representative for purposes of extrapolation, as the ADCS data contains the highest figure of 3,167 (a significant outlier) and omits several lower figures.

This report uses freedom of information requests to all 151 local authorities in England, all of whom responded to provide data, giving a considerably more accurate figure. This accurate measure gives a total for home educated children as of 1st October 2020 of 69,791, which is 5,897 fewer than reported by ADCS. This is not an insignificant difference, representing as it does an 8.43% uplift in the ADCS report due to inaccurate data analysis. Furthermore, not all local authorities saw increased numbers of home educated children from 2019 to 2020, with 13 local authorities reporting reductions of up to 56.40%.

¹⁹ See 8 above

This inaccuracy also appears to pertain to the ADCS data for children who became home educated between 1st September 2020 and the 1st October 2020:

‘16,926 children and young people have become EHE since 1 September 2020. It is therefore estimated that 19,510 children and young people have become EHE since 1 September 2020. This represents 25% of the total estimated number being home educated on school census day, 1st October 2020’.

Again, this uses a mean figure to extrapolate with the same inaccuracies as discussed above. Furthermore, whilst data was not collected as of 1st September for this report (due to limitations on obtaining freedom of information requests on a frequent basis), data was collected for 1st July 2020. This data was initially intended to monitor children entering education at compulsory school age and the date was chosen to intentionally exclude year 11 pupils, who ceased to be of compulsory school age on 30th June 2020. The total number of home educated children from all 151 local authorities as of 1st July 2020 was 61,534, giving a difference between the 1st July 2020 figure and that for 1st October 2020, of 8,257 (excluding year 11 children) This is an increase from 1st July 2020 of 13.42% not allowing for year 11 children. If the data for year 11 pupils were available for 1st July 2020, this uplift from 1st July to 1st October 2020 would be considerably smaller. This figure will include children who became of compulsory school age on 1st September 2020.

We are also aware from previous research that numbers of home educated children have periods of peaks and troughs and fluctuate over the year. Home education support groups report significant rises in demand in late August, through to the October half term, with a falling away after that point. Some of this falling away can be explained by parents whose child has no allocated school place and this year by those who were confused about the Covid 19 arrangements.

The DfE and ADCS refer to rising numbers of home educated children over time and it is correct to say that numbers have risen, but not by the 38% reported by the ADCS, who relied upon extrapolated data as described above.

Data collected in 2019 from all 151 local authorities in England gives a total number for home educated children of 55,501. The uplift from 2019 to 2020 is therefore 14,290, or 25.74%, 12,6% lower than the ADCS report.

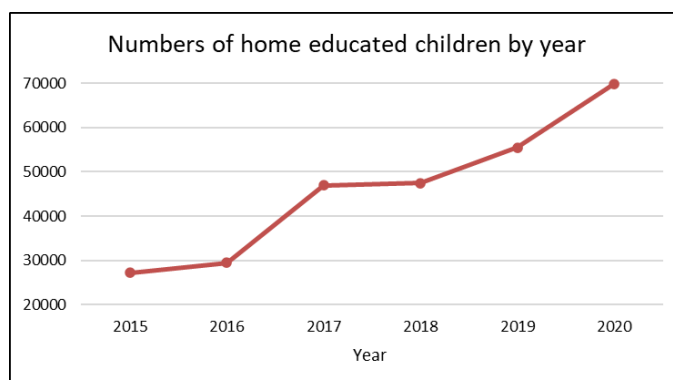


Fig 4: Numbers of home educated children by year

Robert Halfon, stated during oral evidence to the inquiry on 24th November 2020 that *'the trend was going up hugely before Covid. It had doubled in a couple of years'*²⁰, but this is not borne out by the data. We have collected data on numbers of home educated children annually since 2012. Prior to 2019 the datasets were not always complete, with responses ranging from 132 to 146 local authorities. Data for 2017 was obtained from 141 local authorities, for the remaining local authorities the figure provided through freedom of information request in the nearest year to 2017 has been used, in order to ensure maximum accuracy

In 2017, there were 46,892 children known to be home educated in England. The difference in numbers of home educated children between 2017 and 2020 is 22,899 or 48.83% over 3 years. This is 151.17% lower than the 'doubling' cited by Mr Halfon over *'a couple'* of years. It is this type of rhetoric used about home education which leads home educating parents to describe themselves as feeling misunderstood, discriminated against and demonised.

Home educating parents would argue that some of this uplift is accounted for by other factors than actual increases in numbers of children. This is where the proportion of those 'known' and 'unknown' to the local authority becomes important. This report examines that point by using data obtained through a random survey across various home education support groups, which asked parents when and if they became 'known' to their local authority (Annex A).

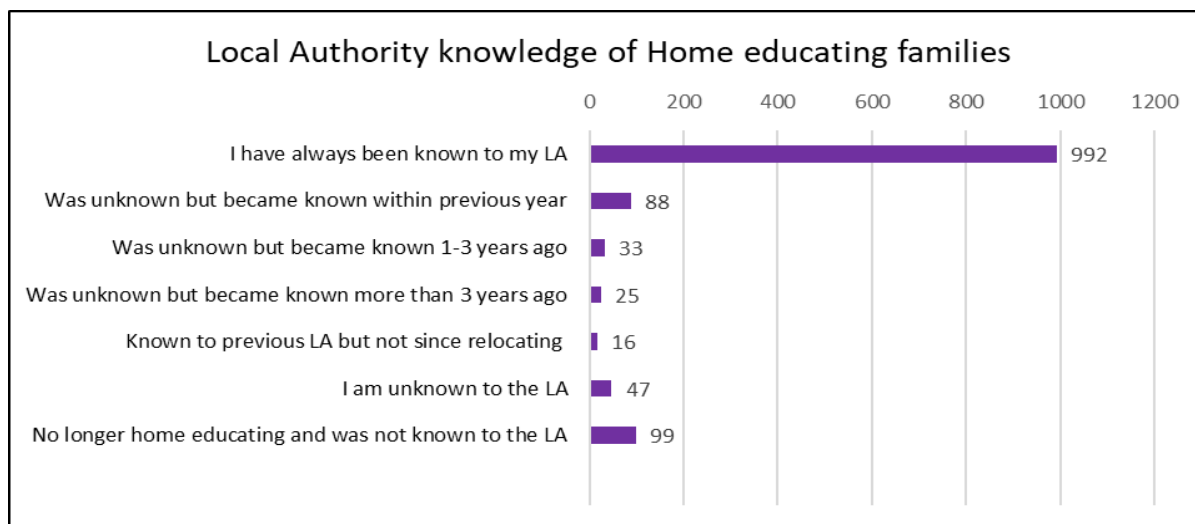


Fig 5: Local authority knowledge of home educated children.

²⁰ House of Commons (2020) 'Education Committee Oral evidence: Home Education, HC 839'. [Online] Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/620/home-education/>

The first 1,300 responses were analysed and 99 respondents were found to be no longer home educating a child, but reported being previously unknown to their local authority. Of the remaining 1,201 parents, 1,138 (94.75%) reported that they are known to their local authority. Of these, 25 (2.08%) became known more than 3 years ago, 33 (2.75%) between 1 and 3 years ago and 88 (7.3%) within the previous year; a total of 146 (12.16%).

The apparent rise in numbers of home educated children from 2017 to 2020 of 48.83% is able to be explained in part, by 12.16% of the cohort surveyed having been identified as home educating within the previous 3 years. This leaves a more accurate figure for the 3 year uplift of 36.67% and would indicate that local authorities have become increasingly diligent at identifying children who are home educated.

Despite claims that *'..many parents who make a positive philosophical choice to educate their children at home, and do an excellent job, this is not always the case. There are tens of thousands of children in England receiving no school education. Many of them are 'off-grid', invisible to local authorities..'*²¹, of those parents surveyed, only 47 reported being unknown to their local authorities. Of these, 4 stated that they are known in terms of regular contact with local authority education staff at meetings and events, without being 'known' in the sense of being on the authorities' lists of parents. This leaves 43 children (3.58%) of whom the local authorities are currently unaware. This would appear to indicate that there are 2,498 children currently being home educated in England (3.58% of the total), but unknown to their local authority, certainly not the *'tens of thousands'* referred to by the Children's Commissioner.

This is not the end of the story, as parents made us aware of cases where children have been kept on the home education records of authorities, after relocating to other regions, at times being listed by as many as 4 separate local authorities. We do not know the extent of this problem, but anecdotally, we are aware of numerous local authorities who decline to remove children from their records when advised by a parent that they are no longer resident within the local authority area. This includes where parents who have moved abroad. The ADCS report states:

'LAs were also asked whether they record EHE children and young people who move out of area as children missing education (CME). Of the 128 LAs who responded, 85 (66%) said that they did and 37 (29%) LAs said that they

²¹ Children's Commissioner (2019) 'Children's Commissioner for England calls for a compulsory register of "off the grid" children'. [Online] Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2019/02/04/huge-increase-in-children-disappearing-from-schools-to-be-educated-at-home-childrens-commissioner-for-england-calls-for-a-compulsory-register-of-off-the-grid-children/>

did not. The remaining six responding LAs were unsure. This marks a noticeable increase of 27 LAs recording these children and young people as CME since the 2019 survey’.

That local authorities are recording children who have left the authority area as home educated children who are missing education, must logically indicate that at least some of the children in the total number of home educated children are ‘phantoms’ created by duplication. We do not know the extent of this duplication, but it seems clear that references to numbers of children unknown to their local authority are likely to be exaggerated.

Support

The Education committee inquiry heard much talk of ‘supporting’ home educated children during its oral evidence²²

‘ADCS fully supports the local authority having a register, not least, as I have said before, because of the increase in numbers, and the ability then to be able to offer advice and support’.

‘We need to make sure that those parents get much better support than there is now’.

‘I will go back to the numbers are now increasing. Local authorities want to support home education, but do it in a responsible way and I am sure parents do’.

This raises the question of what is meant by ‘support’. This question was recently investigated²³ with 144 local authorities providing responses to the question *‘what support do you offer to home educating families’*. Of those responding, 8 local authorities referred to some form of support, primarily in terms of signposting to resources, whilst the majority reported that the ‘support’ they offer is a meeting with the parent. Of these, 117 used terminology including the terms *‘monitoring visit’*, *‘monitor’*, or *‘monitoring’*. Whilst some home educating parents welcome a meeting with their local authority officer, most would argue that this is not support and that true support is not available from the local authority. Our findings support the view that *‘positive interactions between councils, schools and home educating*

²² See 19,

²³ Charles-Warner, W. (2019) ‘Survey of support offered to home educating parents by Local authorities’. Unpublished

*families are possible, where there is a genuine attempt to focus on the wellbeing of children rather than enforcement*²⁴, but home educating parents argue that meetings with local authority officers are not focussed on children's well-being and are not constructive.

We asked home educating parents to tell us what benefits and disadvantages they saw to meetings with their local authority education officer and received a wide range of responses from 73 parents. Disadvantages were summed up clearly by one respondent and covered all of the disadvantages quoted by responding parents. As this response provides a complete overview of reasons given, it is reported below:

Benefits:

'It can help if you are separated from the (other parent), as if they do not approve of home education, a report from the LA might help them to accept it'

'If you are in court (Children Act proceedings) and home education has been raised by the (other parent), or CAFCASS, the education officer can tell them it is all fine'.

'The local authority might have something to offer like exam fees, or resources we can't find anywhere else'.

Disadvantages²⁵:

'Principle: Education is the duty of the parent, not the LA, as is feeding, clothing, potty training and nurturing. Accepting a visit is no different to asking an officer of the State to come into your home and go through the fridge and cupboards.'

Protection of rights: If we do not insist that officers of the State comply with the law we erode our legal rights, as the accepted 'norm' quickly becomes incorporated into accepted practise for all. We need a significant number of people to insist on their rights, in order to protect those rights for all. LAs need to accept that choosing not to have a visit, or meeting, is not an indication of concern.

²⁴ See 19 above.

²⁵ Anonymous home educating parent (2019) 'Collated objections to meetings with Local authority officers'. Unpublished.



Vagaries of assessment: No matter how pleasant, professional and accepting the LA officer is currently, they may well not be the person making the final judgement on your education provision. That could be a manager who has never met you, but decides that they have 'concerns' because you did not mention a certain factor.

Consistency: the LA officer you meet may be exceptionally pleasant, understand your methods and be someone you enjoy meeting. That person will not be there forever, or a colleague may come next time who is the opposite in approach. Staff are made redundant, get ill, retire, or change role.

Judgmental approach: You need to be clear that the LA officer's primary purpose for wanting to visit you could easily be that they want to gain access to your home and family as a means of effectively making a social services assessment of you, as a parent. Very few LA officers have training in home education, all of them have safeguarding training. They could easily decide that they dislike you, the way you speak, the fact that you have a large family, are a single parent, are of different ethnicity to them (yes, sadly that happens), have lifestyle choices that are not mainstream, or for many other reasons. LA officers are very far from 'non-judgemental' and the visit could very quickly be followed by referral to children's social services for reasons which would never otherwise result in them being involved with your family.

Judgemental approach 2: The LA officer may not understand your child's needs, or personality. They may have very set ideas of how a child should learn and what they should achieve at what age. If you follow the National Curriculum and have a strongly structured approach, this may not be a problem, but if you are less structured it frequently is. Even the most structured can have problems with LA officers insisting on set hours, tutors, desks and chairs, timetables and set hours.

Diverting from education: By inviting other people to judge your home education you run the risk of causing problems for yourself and your children, as you focus on what you think someone else wants you to be doing.

Qualification: More properly lack of qualification. Most home education officers are former teachers, with the second highest number coming from a social work role. Parents may feel that LA officers are therefore unqualified to make any assessment of home education and some may even be unable to recognise other forms of education or even when learning is taking place. A good analogy would

be to insist that CofE vicars inspect the religious observances of Jewish families, or vice versa.

The expert: Many home educators subscribe to the view that learning is a natural process, which is different for everyone and that it is only the child who can assess the education. As parents we can intimately observe and facilitate, but the learning is the ultimately the child's. For many, the vast majority of learning is done in the child's head. This is often concerning for those trained in a system where all children are expected to do the same thing, in the same way and at the same time. The state system promotes early reading and written recitation of facts, so if you choose other means you are working in a completely different work view.

Privacy: Home education is an intimate, personal experience. It is integral to everyday life. It involves private spaces in the home, personal conversations, about your day to day life, friendships and aspirations. Many people do not want to have those parts of their lives exposed to a stranger.

Safety: For SEN children and children coming out of school, having had a bad experience, the visit could well be experienced as highly stressful and invasive, not least because the LA officer represents the system that failed them. Many parents consider it their duty to safeguard their children from such invasion of their personal space.

Special needs: The LA officer will have little or no understanding of your child's individual needs. They may have sight of the child's EHCP, but that tells them very little about the child, apart from what others judged about the child at some past date. That officer may judge you and your child and find you lacking, based on their own mistaken ideas about your child. Very few LA officers have training in SEN and those that do, have very little.

Negativity: The LA officer may well judge your education negatively, for a wide variety of reasons, including that they did not notice your child's resources, they were not concentrating when you mentioned achievement, or simple lack of understanding. It is much less likely that you will omit something when writing a report, as you are not 'on the spot'.

GDPR and data protection: The LA officer will often ask you to sign forms, frequently unseen save for the signature box. These forms often contain a generalised consent for the La officer to share and access your data. Many parents would not wish their data to be accessed or shared in this way. It is very

hard to resist a persuasive person who has put themselves in a position of control over you and by the time you contact them to withdraw consent, it may well be too late.

Nothing to offer: Very few LAs have anything to offer to you. They will usually phrase their visit as to offer support and advice, but the home education community has thousands of highly experienced, committed and supportive families who can provide far more relevant advice than the LA officer can. There are also significant numbers of free and readily accessed online resources which your LA cannot offer you, but you can find online. The only 'support' that the majority of LAs offer is an intrusive visit.

Misrepresentation: Many experienced home educating families will confirm that LA officers frequently misrepresent their role and their powers. It is not unusual for LA officers to seek to disempower parents and to manipulate them. This is far easier for them to do in person, than in writing.

Fairness: The public expects schools to be inspected because the public funds those schools through state taxation. The State has a right to inspect those schools, because the State is responsible for them. Even so, those schools are only inspected every 3-6 years and yet home educating families are asked to allow inspection annually, or more often. Many parents question why they should be held to higher standards than schools are and information sought from them more frequently. By providing information in writing, you minimise the effect the 'inspection' has on you and your family.

Normalisation: By normalising 'inspection' by state officials, you legitimise the impression that home educating families are somehow different, less acceptable, dangerous, or abusive. Many parents would question why they should be expected to help to do that.

Personal reasons: You may have many reasons why you prefer to not accept a stranger into your home. Mine will not be yours, but both will be valid'.

Conclusions

This report examines published data on numbers of home educated children in England, finding it to be flawed, at times to such a degree as to render it unable to be relied upon. Published data consistently overstates the numbers of children who

are home educated, most usually because those bodies researching the issues lack access to the primary stakeholders in this matter, home educating parents.

We expose myths of there being ‘tens of thousands’ of unknown home educated children. We also provide clear and cogent evidence of the real reasons behind parents electing to home educate their children, most notably as a result of failings on the part of the school system, or strongly held beliefs that home education provides a better education for children than does school education.

We find that Covid 19 has had a significant effect on the numbers of home educated children, most notably during the expected ‘peak’ period of late August through to the Autumn half term. It was of particular note that the majority of those cases were not cases of parents choosing to home educate their child due to concerns about Covid 19, but because lockdown had allowed those parents to experience their children’s positive response to learning at home. Where Covid 19 concerns were expressed, parents told us that punitive measures taken by schools had prompted the move to home education. This is a learning opportunity for Government, as it was apparent that those parent would prefer to stay within he school system, if they were supported to do so.

We note that home educating families lack trust in their local authorities and accept that those parents consider public bodies to be unable to move away from punitive approaches that alienate those families and compound that mistrust, moving toward more positive and respectful relationships.

This report opens the way for fact based dialogue between home education stakeholders which could pave the way for improved relationships and we welcome that dialogue.

Further research

This is a preliminary report with further data collection and analysis due in early 2021, in order to add to our understanding of the effects of Covid 19 on trends in numbers of home educated children over time.

During oral evidence to the education committee on 24th November 2020, one witness stated that:

‘one of the roles of a register is to rule out all those children that you don’t need to have worries about.’ The purpose for any register should not be to intrude into



the lives of those choosing the option to home educate, but instead to ensure that the minority of children who might need further support are able to access it'.

The purpose of this report is not to examine the rationale behind current proposals for mandatory registration, but to provide accurate and informative data which assists stakeholders in making rational decisions. However, in compiling this data, respondents volunteered commentary on mandatory registration alongside concerns that it is *'the thin end of the wedge'*, *'a euphemism for mandatory monitoring'* and *'giving power to local authorities to refuse deregistration'*. Parents cite significant numbers of cases of local authorities abusing the power they currently hold and lack of compliance with legislation and guidance by those authorities.

This report does not take that forward. However, we would welcome further research to increase understanding of local authorities' relationships with home educating families, their use of notices under the Education Act 1996 s437, their use of school attendances orders and their complaint handling systems and outcomes.

W. Charles-Warner
December 2020

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Annex A

Poll used to survey of children known to their local authority (one option only)

I have always been known to my local authority
I was previously unknown to my local authority but have become known to them in the last year
I was previously unknown to my local authority but have become known to them in the 2 years
I was previously unknown to my local authority but have become known to them in the last 3 or more years
I was known to my previous local authority but not known since relocating
I am unknown to the LA
No longer home educating and was not known to the LA

Annex B

Survey of reasons why parents choose to home educate their child

Home education provides a better education than school.
I do not consider the school curriculum to be suitable, or relevant
General dissatisfaction with the school system
Health reasons, including the child's mental health
Covid 19 lockdown gave me opportunity to see how much my child thrived learning at home* Introduced for third survey
Covid related reasons tick A, B, or C
A: My child is at increased risk from Covid19 due to pre-existing
Concern that the environment of schools increases the risk of Covid 19 infection
C: Concern that if my child attends school they will expose a vulnerable family member to Covid 19
A temporary measure (please state why here)
More family time
Greater ability to go travelling together
School refuser, or school phobic
School could not meet my child's special needs
No school places available at preferred school
Bullying at school
Religious reasons
Child is a performer
Child is gifted and talented
School pressurised me into removing the child
Other, please specify