

Written evidence submitted by Helen Murray to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB14).

Executive Summary

1. This submission contains an introduction to the author and reasons for submitting evidence. It then focuses on warning this government about the potential unintended consequences of policy amnesia in regards to introducing a register of children not in school. It uses Cambridge as an example of a thriving home education community and its Local Authority as a potential example of good practice for consideration. It also highlights the vital importance of thinking through the sheer scale of resources and investment to avoid negative consequences for children.

Introduction and reason for submitting evidence

2. This submission is made by Helen Murray, BA (hons), MA, MPhil, QTLS, a 45-year-old mixed race British woman living, working and home educating in Cambridge. Since last submitting a call for evidence regarding home education four years ago, Helen continues to successfully home educate her nine-year-old daughter who is now formally identified autistic with a PDA profile.

3. Helen has been actively involved in the vibrant and supportive Cambridge home education community since 2016 and is a fully qualified teacher who has also worked in education development, policy and research since 2002. This work was on Labour government-funded education development programmes in collaboration with DfE, NFER and QCA and later with the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Notably, despite having a largely positive experience and outcomes of education, it was this experience which very much informed the decision to home educate.

4. The reason for submitting evidence is to express serious concerns about the potential impact of not yet thought-through, unintended consequences of introducing a register of children not in school. While the idea of a register is not a problem in itself and safeguarding all children is of paramount importance, the actual practicalities of implementing one need very careful consideration to avoid the very real risk of Local Authorities misguidedly forcing children back into schools inappropriately when this may be very much not in their best interests and cause already struggling families to experience even greater trauma. It also risks actually having the opposite of the intended purpose by causing the very tiny minority of families with children who might be at risk from doubling down on their efforts to ensure their children are not seen.

Factual information for the committee

5. I would like the committee to consider that in Cambridge, the Local Authority (LA), Cambridgeshire County Council, makes very worthy attempts on extremely limited resources, to maintain a positive and trusting relationship with home educating families. Likewise, volunteer parents put in many hours of work to facilitate this through regular positive dialogue meetings and communications with the LA and the home educating community.

6. Home educators are encouraged, but not required, to voluntarily register with the LA which involves submitting a light-touch annual report on what their child has been doing. There has sometimes been misunderstanding about the legal remit of what the LA can enquire about but they have proved themselves to be open to learning and adjusting as necessary.

7. There is recognition of the failings of schools and SEND provision and a willingness to involve relevant colleagues in discussions with home educators in the interests of all local children. Even in this tiny pocket of good practice, changes in personnel can significantly disrupt this relationship when there is a lack of understanding about the variety of home education approaches or a lack of willingness to even try to understand what they are and how very different they are from schooled approaches.

8. Understanding home education requires looking at education through a very different lens and reassurance is sought that if a register is introduced, adequate training must be in place for LAs with the input of experienced home educators and scholars who understand different ways of learning before they are allowed to interpret any new guidance (which itself will also require collaborative input).

9. In Cambridge, under the banner 'Cambridge Home Educating Families', successive generations of home educating families have passed the baton to each other, continuing and evolving the community to include as many home educating families as possible and collaborating to share ideas, resources and set up social and learning opportunities for home educated children locally. There is a shared calendar of activities, an email list with associated searchable conversation archive, and a website¹ to support newcomers in finding their feet which are maintained collaboratively by everyone.

10. All styles of home education are welcomed; some look very much like 'school at home', others can look nothing at all like school – they are all valid and all tailored to the needs of children. Not only LAs but parents would benefit from support that understands this and does not privilege only the 'schooled' approaches which are so conditioned in pretty much anyone who attended a school.

¹ See <https://www.cambridgehomeeducators.org.uk/>

11. The Cambridge demographic in general and the home education community in particular has a preponderance of neurodiversity, likely due to the presence of the University, technology and science in and around the area. Many home educating families regard schools in general and in Cambridge in particular, as ill-equipped to adequately meet these needs.

12. Families either proactively choose to home educate or feel forced to do so in order to meet their legal obligation to provide a suitable education for their children. There needs to be a much wider understanding of the complexities that what is 'suitable' for one child may be entirely unsuitable for another.

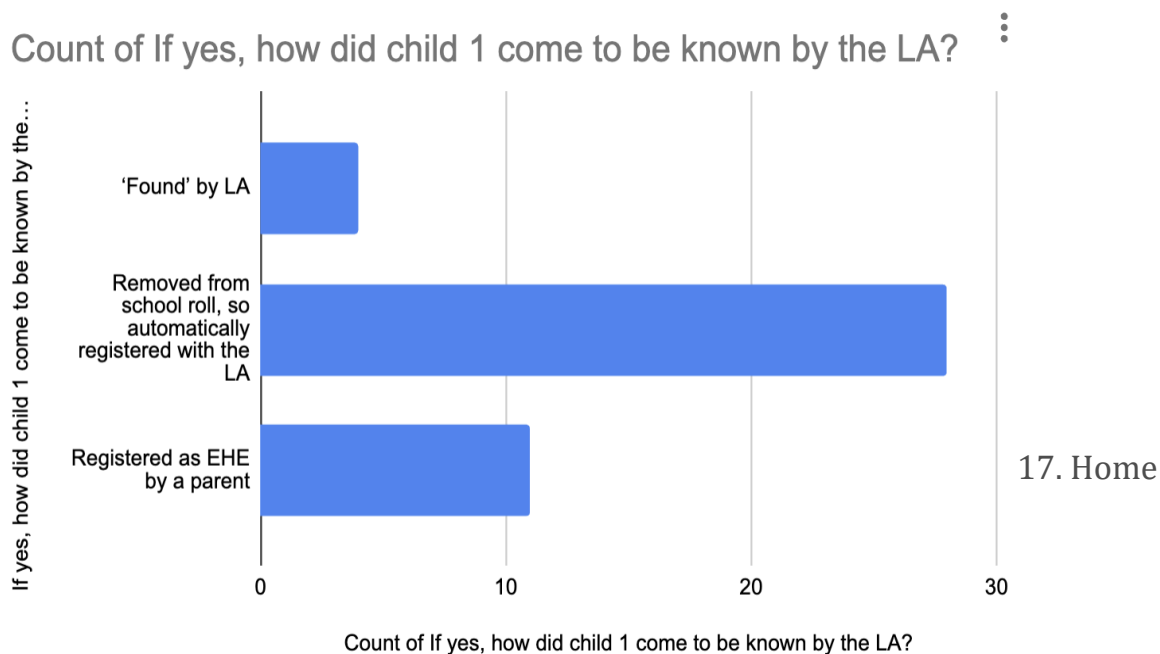
13. If, like in Cambridge, adequate support is given to warmly encourage parents to voluntarily register and make them feel safe to do so, this should be sufficient and should be made desirable by increasing access to support e.g. exam fees, eligibility to participate in, for example after-school clubs in local schools. A compulsory register will not in any way improve safeguarding and may in some cases, create worse outcomes for children.

14. The tiny minority who intend to harm their own children need to be tracked in a different way and there are existing systems in place for this which have already failed children like the recent tragic case of Sara Sharif, who has been very unhelpfully weaponised by the media to demonise home educators.

15. The vast majority of home educating parents are, by necessity as they bear the full burden of responsibility, actually more interested and invested in their children's education than parents who delegate that responsibility to schools. By trusting parents less and eroding their and their children's rights to an education they deem suitable rather than one the state deems suitable we risk creating apathy, alienation and parents taking less responsibility for advocating effectively for their children's education.

16. In 2023 an experienced local home educator conducted a voluntary survey inviting some 400 local home educators to participate. 70 responses were received giving some useful insights into the different approaches parents used to home educate their children, their ages, where in Cambridge they live, reasons for home educating, SEND, gender etc. Of those who were registered with the LA, there was a striking number who

were home educating because the children had been removed from school with the remainder either voluntarily registered or 'found' by the LA:

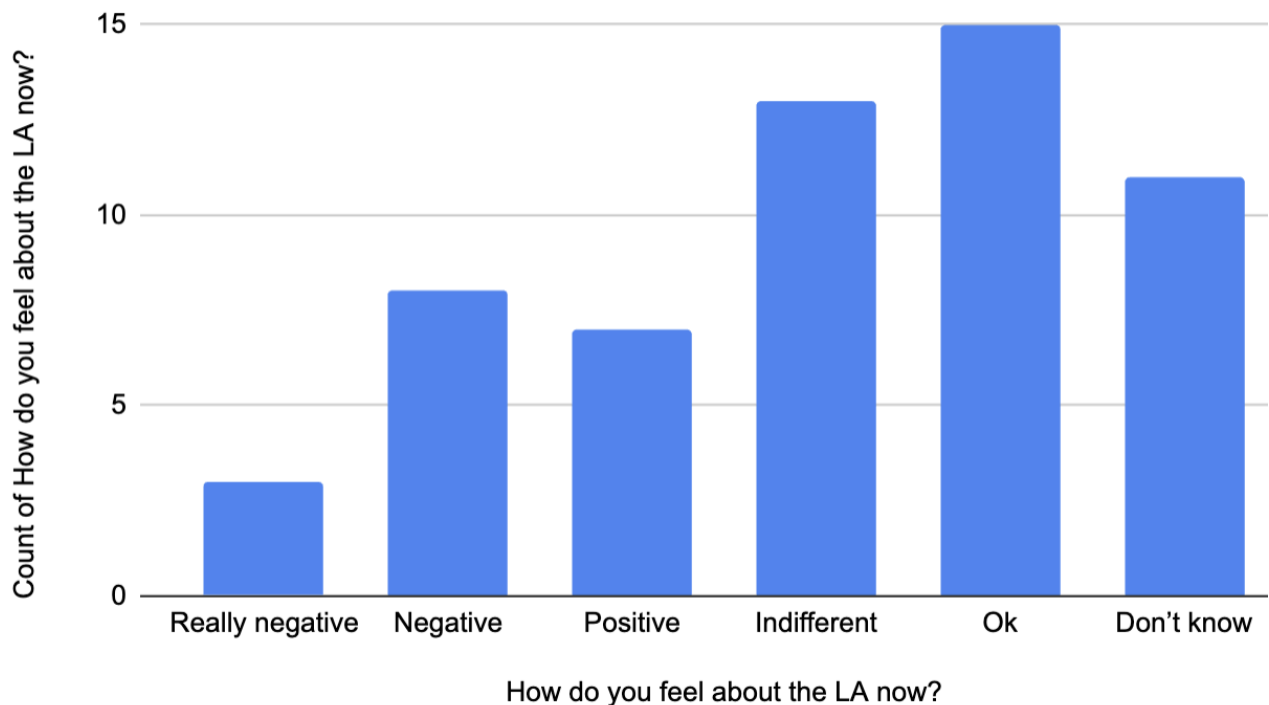


education is a privilege for those who can afford it on one income so that one parent can earn while the other focuses on education and an almost impossible struggle for those who can't. It is criminal that home educators do not receive the c. £8k per year they are saving their LAs in a school place and there have been examples in Cambridge where parents have been awarded this amount where suitable provision in a school was desired but not available. Making this available to families would go a long way to encouraging voluntary registration and reporting and make home educators feel taken seriously. This of course needs to be balanced with the risk of parents who would abuse this by ensuring the other existing multi-agency systems for identifying at-risk children are more robustly implemented.

18. The government needs to be aware that those who have been formally excluded or off-rolled should already be subject to monitoring as clearly there is already a problem. The vast majority of home educating parents are not in that situation. Legally a parent must judge if a child's education is suitable, whether that be in school or otherwise and I see no reason to change this law. Unregistered schools are a separate issue. Schools which operate illegally must be dealt with entirely separately and voluntary registration with a supportive local authority could provide access to information on recognising illegal schools and enlisting the help of parents in reporting them. A collaborative rather than authoritarian approach with working with home educating

parents would garner trust. Below are some statistics from the aforementioned survey regarding how parents felt about the LA:

Count of How do you feel about the LA now?



19. Following the most recent Positive Dialogue meeting² with the LA which had record numbers of home educators attending (around 60 as opposed to about 5 at the previous one), many comments were received by the parent volunteer organisers afterwards saying things like:

“I feel less scared of the LA now.”

“I feel more confident about being registered since the meeting.”

“I feel like they genuinely tried to listen to us and learn about what we do.”

20. The committee needs to be aware there is huge variation across the country in how LAs approach home education, with some being very punitive indeed and causing great distress to parents and children through inappropriate use of school attendance orders and child protection registers. There are examples of families in Cambridge who have moved into the area to escape such horrors and subsequently very successfully engaged with social services to get appropriate supports in place. Such extreme

² <https://www.cambridgehomeeducators.org.uk/positive-dialogue-forum.html>

measures could be avoided by more consistent approaches across the country grounded in genuine respect for an interest in alternative modes of learning³.

Action recommendations for consideration

- Look to Cambridgeshire County Council as an example of good practice in its approach to supporting home educators.
- Seek input from both new and experienced home educating families to develop guidance and training in relation to a register if one must be introduced.
- Before implementation, demonstrate with evidence, how a register of children not in school would actually have made a difference to Sara Sharif given that she would have been on one already due to having come out of school whilst also not creating additional burdens for the majority of home educators.
- Carefully consider what evaluation tools will be used and ensure home educators are considered equal stakeholders in their development.
- Outline steps that will be taken to make all parents feel safe and trusted.
- Demonstrate an understanding of latest research on alternative models of learning and the outmoded approaches of our current systems of mass education.
- This government would do well to avoid policy amnesia and remember the previous Labour government's efforts in the areas of personalised learning and citizenship/democratic education.
- Recognise and address that an economy that requires two full time incomes in order to afford housing is not sustainable or desirable for a successful society.
- Recognise that without considerable investment and resources, it will be completely impractical to inspect individual home educating families. There is a very real risk that a register will lead to regulation which will potentially hamper the life chances of many children. Home educated children may be a minority in themselves but they are considerably less of a minority than home educated children likely to come to harm at the hands of their own parents. In the equation they are the majority and their needs must be recognised, respected and not compromised in the blind hope of catching a rare tragic case.

³ <https://edu-rev.weebly.com/ideas-library>

- The great beauty of home education is that it is flexible, responsive, able to cater for very diverse needs, often suiting children who do not do well with the model of school. If we start trying to impose regulation, trying to monitor, assess and evaluate things that are intrinsically hard to measure, we further restrict the possibilities for many children and in trying to protect a tiny minority of children, we will harm a great many more.
- Consult other parties on this to ensure a long-term view than will span elected terms.

January 2025.