

Written evidence submitted by Julie Spriddle to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB62)

Submitted by Julie Spriddle and David Priestley

Executive summary:

1. In this submission we will cover the following:

- Introduction
- Areas we as home educators are concerned about:
 - Impact of reporting on how we home educate
 - Implications of needing to give details of learning activities outside the home
 - What reporting will look like for us
 - We will lose the right to a private family home for as long as we home educate
 - Mandatory interview with our child
 - No means of redress if we have a grievance
 - What our child has said they will do if forced into school
 - There is no meaningful support on offer
- Recommended changes to make the Bill workable
- Suggestions for oral evidence

Introduction:

2. We are home educating parents of a single child. Ours is not a dramatic or sad story. As parents we made the decision to electively home educate our child before their first birthday. Today, we have a young teenager who is studying for their GCSEs which we have organised and are funding entirely on our own.

3. As a family we are extremely concerned about the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill as it has been introduced, particularly as it relates to elective home education.

4. In its current form, the Bill represents a massive intrusion into our day-to-day life, removing our right to a private life and placing a heavy administrative burden on us in the form of reporting our activities to the local authority on a frequent basis.

Impact of reporting requirement on how we home educate:

5. Home education is at its core a flexible undertaking. We have a direction we're headed in with overall goals, but no set timetable or hours. We do plan, but do not put limited time frames on activities which could happen at any time during the day. We follow rabbit trails, letting our child explore subjects, expanding and researching on the spot which regularly takes us outside the scope of the original lesson. We allow for spontaneity. If a learning activity isn't working for us, we stop and find something else. Sometimes we don't do the things we intended to, but do something else instead, equally educational but not what we'd originally planned on. The Bill would have us logging every single one of these

interactions along with which parent oversaw them, plus how long we spent doing so. Every website we visit, every education provider we use, no matter how briefly, would fall under its remit. We could visit dozens of websites in a week, all of which would have to be checked against the list we'd previously reported to the local authority along with duration of use. We expect to spend a lot of our time recording what we did, when, using what, with whom and for what purpose. We will also need to give careful consideration to whether our local authority is likely to approve of educational activities going forward.

Implications of needing to give details of learning activities outside the home:

6. When it comes to learning activities outside the home or with third parties, we shift with the seasons and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Some activities are planned and paid for, others are ad hoc and are free to us.

7. For example, coming across a street performance by a theatre troupe in town, watching the play, then talking to the crew and going backstage to find out more. Visiting our local museum then chatting to the curator at length about how exhibitions are put together. Joining free community creative sessions at our local arts centre. Or volunteering at a local community allotment and learning more about growing food.

8. The Bill will mean we not only have to log these activities and account for how long we spend doing them, but we must give full details of who we spoke to so they can be contacted at a future point to corroborate that our child was there. This is completely unworkable and will mean that such people will refuse to talk to us once they realise we are home educators.

9. For those providers who we pay for their services, the Bill is going to put an extra administrative burden on them, forcing them to treat our child differently to non-home educated students. In our case this would be providers of sporting activities, creative writing classes and art lessons.

10. We spoke to one of our sporting activity providers and they were shocked to hear about the Bill, immediately worrying about the administrative implications, needing to track their home educated customers and what this would mean for their prices. As home educators, we enjoy hefty discounts with these providers, but I have no doubt that these discounts will disappear and the subsequent price rises will put these activities out of our reach. This will deprive our home educated child of educational experiences and the opportunities for social interaction that come with them.

What reporting will look like for us:

11. Any changes to our child's education will need to be reported back to the local authority within fifteen days or risk the start of School Attendance Order proceedings. We expect to spend a huge amount of time carefully logging everything, checking it against

what we previously said, then reporting back to the local authority. We anticipate that this could mean making weekly returns to the local authority.

12. We will of course have to follow this up with monthly Subject Access Requests of the local authority to ensure records are accurate and request corrections as necessary. We will have to do this to protect ourselves because the Bill states the penalty for any minor clerical error, omission or apparent reluctance to meet whatever arbitrary demand our local authority may make, will result in the start of School Attendance Order proceedings.

We will lose the right to a private family home for as long as we home educate:

13. The changes to the School Attendance Order will mean that we as home educators no longer have the right to a private family home. The local authority will demand access to inspect our property to assess its suitability and compel our child to submit to an interview.

14. Our family home will be evaluated against unknown criteria. We both work part-time which means a reduced income. We live in a poorer area of our city. Our tiny house is stuffed with education materials, art supplies and books, but education is not limited to a single part of the house. Home education is embedded into every aspect of our day-to-day lives and takes place wherever seems most appropriate. We fear that such a visit would risk our child being forced into school due to lack of a dedicated space for education, a 'classroom' for want of a better word.

15. Furthermore, our teenaged child considers their bedroom a place of sanctuary. Even we as their parents do not enter without express permission. Our child is extremely reluctant to allow a stranger, namely the local authority home education officer, into their personal space. Our child feels they would be judged on their belongings and how they are organised in their bedroom.

Mandatory interview with our child:

16. On the subject of the mandated interview our child is not happy but concedes that they will probably cope now they are older. However, they do not like talking to strangers or being put on the spot as their mind goes blank, particularly under stress. They expect this coerced visit and subsequent interview to be deeply unpleasant but since they wouldn't want to be forced into school would probably submit to it.

No means of redress if we have a grievance:

17. The Bill makes no provision for seeking redress if our local authority gets it wrong, other than saying the Secretary of State for Education can intervene, which they never have before and we have no reason to believe they ever will in the future.

18. Should we make a minor clerical error then submit to a home inspection and allow our child to be interviewed, but the local authority officer doesn't like what they see or hear,

they will continue with the School Attendance Order. If we disagree with their assessment there is nothing we can do about it. We either submit to the School Attendance Order and register our child at school or we risk fines and potential imprisonment if we do not. We do not have the money for a legal defence in court and even if we did, going by past court cases, we'd expect the DfE to ensure we lost, particularly in light of the law change represented by this Bill. The government would need to ensure it publicly made examples of home educators so that the rest of our community were cowed into submission.

What our child has said they will do if forced into school:

19. We cannot say in advance what we as parents would do if we were in this position as it would depend on the circumstances. Our child has indicated that they would go to school if forced to do so, but would take a book and sit at the back reading unless the lesson was interesting. They don't care about detentions and would only do homework if it was interesting. They aren't sure about uniforms either and have noted that not having the correct uniform seems to mean being sent home, which is fine by them. Our child's view is they'd just get through the school experience, wait until they are too old for the local authority to do anything, and then get back to their real education at home. They've also noted there is no reason we couldn't continue with home education in the evenings and weekends.

There is no meaningful support on offer:

20. Finally, the Bill is all stick with no carrot. There is absolutely no gain for our family here. The Bill says the local authority must provide information about home education, which means they need to host a page on their website.

21. For the avoidance of doubt, for the 'support' to be meaningful, it must be something we actually want and need.

22. If the government wants to do something useful, the absolute minimum in the way of support would be to make accessing examinations easier for home educating families. We understand we are responsible for paying for exams but just finding an exam centre willing to take a home educated child can be difficult.

23. We are lucky in that we have access to a private exam centre which is within easy travel distance of our home address. Prices for exams start at £250 for a GCSE and £500 for an A Level. Having checked the internet, it appears we pay five times more for each examination than a state school would. If the government wanted to help us, they'd instruct the local authority to work with local home educators to set up an appropriate exam centre, then charge us at a similar rate to schools.

Recommended changes to make the Bill workable:

24. To conclude, things we would like to see changed in this Bill:

- Limit the information the local authority and secretary of state can add to the register for children not in school.
- Drop the requirement for parents to report all changes within fifteen days.
- Drop the requirement for mandated home visits and child interviews.
- In the event of home education being found unsuitable, allow a period of time for improvement (at least six months) before proceeding with the School Attendance Order. Require the local authority to be clear on where they need to see improvements and why.
- Set a limit in law on how long a third party education provider would need to be providing education or instruction before they'd be within the scope of the reporting part of this bill.
- Introduce an independent complaints body separate to the Department for Education or the Secretary of State, which home educating parents could turn to at any time for help if their local authority is being unreasonable.
- Introduce meaningful support for home educators, which at a minimum should be a duty to ensure access to public examinations charged at cost.

Suggestions for oral evidence:

25. We would like to recommend that when a call for oral evidence is requested, that the select committee contacts:

- Wendy Charles-Warner of the charity Education Otherwise - <https://www.educationotherwise.org/>
- Fiona Nicholson of EdYourself - <https://edyourself.wordpress.com/>

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