

Written evidence submitted by Nikki O'Rourke to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB89)

I am writing to express my concerns about the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, particularly its potential negative impact on home-educating families and the education their children receive. My background provides insight into the challenges home-educating families face and the potential unintended consequences of this Bill.

I bring a broad range of educational experience to this discussion, including:

- Teaching and Leadership:
 - Qualified as a primary school teacher via a PGCE.
 - Worked at a three-form entry state primary school in Greater London.
 - Served as Foundation Stage Lead and part of the Senior Leadership Team at a one-form entry school in London, a challenging setting with high staff and student mobility.
 - Acted as a staff governor.
- Further Education and Research:
 - Earned a Master's in Early Childhood Education from the Institute of Education while teaching.
 - Led a Free School bid, collaborating with the New Schools Network and exploring diverse educational approaches worldwide.
- Home Education and Community Involvement:
 - Home-educated my children for the past 10 years.
 - Organised weekly meetups, workshops, and events for the local home-educating community.
 - Ran projects exploring schools as multigenerational learning spaces.
- Charity and Advocacy:
 - Served as a trustee for an education charity focused on personalised learning.
 - Collaborated with other charities to organise educational conferences and festivals.

Specific Concerns with the Bill

- Registering and Reporting Requirements (436C)

My family already submits annual education reports to the local authority, which I find reasonable if expectations remain clear. However, the proposed measures seem overly broad, favouring formal methods over diverse approaches. Many home educators rely on informal, spontaneous learning, making it challenging to quantify hours or conform to rigid frameworks.

- Frequency of Updates (436D)

Requiring families to notify local authorities of changes within 15 days is impractical for those with dynamic educational approaches. This could create excessive administrative burdens and discourage external providers from working with home-educated children.

- Minimum Hours Requirement

Mandating minimum education hours overlooks the effectiveness of one-on-one and informal learning, which can achieve more in less time than in classroom settings. Forcing families to document hours prioritises quantity over quality.

- Potential Bias in Oversight

Local authority staff may lack the training to assess diverse educational methods fairly. Teacher training focuses on classroom settings, which may lead to biased evaluations of home education based on preconceived ideas rather than a proper understanding of alternative approaches.

1. I feel some of the proposals in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill are very likely to negatively impact home educating families. I understand the vital need to safeguard vulnerable children, but it is important not erode the rights of the vast majority of caring, law-abiding families using this as the justification. I really hope that when looking to refine the details in this Bill this will remain a top priority.

2. I have had the privilege to see many children succeed in education. I have seen lots of children thrive in school settings. I believe that every child has the right to a world class education, but I fundamentally disagree that this is provided through standardising the experience. There is no one size fits all approach, and looking at the data on school attendance, mental health and SEND applications, our current system is fitting fewer and fewer. Potentially it is also this narrowing of approach that is leading to the increasing numbers of families choosing to home educate.

3. Over my time home educating, I have learnt how different education can/should look for different children and have had many of my own preconceptions challenged. Many of the norms that are taken for granted in schooling- e.g. expectations of when a child should meet a particular milestone and rates of progress are arbitrary and much more related to the logistics of providing and monitoring an education en masse, rather than

meeting the individual needs of the children. When families currently remove their children from this system, they are truly able to tailor the education to each child, allow them the time and space to flourish-this can be both faster or slower than would be possible within school. I am very concerned that the Bill will negatively impact this ability, which would reduce the appropriateness of their education.

4. My personal experience of home educating families is of people who are wholly committed to the education and wellbeing of their children. This is definitely not to say that all these families chose this freely. Many have come to it as a last resort after fighting the school system - a system that was causing their child harm - but have then worked tirelessly to create a suitable education for their children.

5. The narrative around home education is almost always focussed on the negative. It is about blame and failure, whether that be the schools' or the families', which stops the focus being on the best interests of the children. This can make education providers defensive, feeling the choice to home educate is a judgment of the school or a failure of the family, rather than a decision made due to the needs of the child. I wish we could foster a positive relationship between mainstream education and home education, as I know we have a lot to learn from and share with each other. The many families of SEND young people, who have taken on the full responsibility of their child's education, have worked so hard to find what works and actually allows their child to flourish, wouldn't it be amazing if all this hard work and knowledge could be shared in schools to help them support similar children within their settings?

6. When I set up the social group for my local home educating community, the families who attended were those who had chosen home education for philosophical reasons. As time has gone on and we cater for an older group, we have had an increasing number of children joining after de-registering. These young people are often suffering from significant mental health challenges.

7. The families come to us damaged and distrustful of the school system and the local authorities. A lot of them have found it extremely difficult to make the decision to take their children out of school, due to the stigma around home education, often trying everything with the school to try to make it work first. This means they often only make that decision once their child is in extreme crisis, when they feel the risk is too great.

8. We have young people who have attempted suicide, been self-harming or developed extreme OCD before being taken out. These families then must overcome these health issues (and often immense misplaced guilt and even shame on their part) and try and find a successful strategy to provide an education that allows their child to flourish.

9. I have personally witnessed amazing transformations. Some of the most extreme behaviours reduce as the environmental stressors are reduced. In more suitable environments they can reduce to an extent that they no longer cause the barrier to learning they did within school.

10. As home educating families, our role is work with our children, to find them the experiences and resources that allow them to be successful along their chosen path. This looks very different family to family, or even sibling to sibling, and often nothing like school, but at each stage we are striving for the best outcomes for our children. I feel strongly rather than putting pressure to make home education look more like school we should be finding ways (potentially making use of AI as is a current government aim) to make school more like home education.

11. We have the privilege to be able to be extremely flexible and to pivot our approaches as and when it is needed. I have watched so many families, from all different backgrounds, commit so much time and effort into discovering what is out there and finding out how they can access it, only for the media to portray us as either neglectful or pandering. The constant rhetoric that school is the best/safest place for children is so hurtful and disrespectful to those families who have come so close to losing their child due to their school experience.

12. This is especially confusing when the Government's own research does not portray school as safe place for many. A report from the Tony Blair Institute states, "More than a quarter of secondary-school pupils report being bullied in the past year. More than a third of teachers experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils in the same time. Around a fifth of teaching time is lost to disruption in the classroom." This data was collected from Department of Education research.

13. For my own family, home education has allowed me to focus on my children's interests, enable them to progress at their pace without feeling like they were failing, or 'less than' when some things came slower to them than others, or being held back from diving deeply into a subject that truly captures their curiosity.

14. In my understanding the LAs already have the powers to step in when it is believed a suitable education is not being provided, and social services have the powers to step in if they believe a child is at risk of harm.

15. All these powers are built on the basic principle of innocent until proven guilty. However this Bill makes it seem as home educating parents we are treated in the opposite way, we will have to constantly prove that we are good enough? It feels like an erosion of trust in the family.

16. The current horrific case of Sara Sharif, which seems to being used to justify the clamp down on home education, highlights how these pre-

existing powers did not serve to protect this poor little girl. Not because the authorities needed additional powers to protect her, but because the existing ones were not followed through correctly. No increase in legislation will improve outcomes unless it can be effectively actioned. These failures are often blamed on the workload for these services, so I just don't understand how potentially, massively, increasing this burden by inappropriately conflating home education with an automatic safeguarding risk is going to solve this?

17. My family is known by our local authority, and I send in yearly reports on both my home educated children, so practically I am already on a register. I am happy to do this if the parameters are reasonable and clear. Efficient and timely responses to LA enquiries and a yearly report summarising the education provided giving an overview of the approaches and resources used should be sufficient.

18. When I was teaching I was accountable to; the children in my class, their parents and the government (my employer). So I passed on information that reassured these 'stakeholders' that I was providing a good education to the child, that represented value for money to my employer. Now I am accountable to my children, to ensure that I am offering them an education that fully equips them to be successful independent adults.

19. The expectations of what information we would need to provide the LA currently seems extremely far reaching (currently unlimited) and already shows a bias to the style of education that is valued/understood, favouring a more formal approach. My own family have quite an eclectic approach where we have some tutors, some online structured courses as well as attending some learning settings, but these are no more important/valuable than the hundreds of informal conversations, spontaneous research, adventures and interactions we have with friends and family. For those families, like mine, who have chosen home education for philosophical reasons, it is a parenting approach as well as an educational one, it would be hard to disentangle the parts of our days that were not related to education as it is not purely confined to lesson times. So it would also be almost impossible to quantify these in terms of hours.

20. The idea of mandating a minimum number of hours for home education to occur feels very complicated. Many of the formal lessons that home educated children attend are either individual or in small groups, does a one hour, one to one, lesson really compare to a one hour class session in a class of 30 (especially with the research shows that a fifth of time in school is lost to disruption?) As home educators we don't have to limit our education to term times, so if we are to spread our input over the year how would that be accounted for? It feels like you could end up requiring a detailed timetable of family life? Mandating the number of hours feels a bit like an example to measuring something because it can be measured, rather than because it is truly an indicator of the quality of education.

21. Currently it is also unclear how often we need to update the information with the LA (436D). In my yearly report I describe what we have covered over the year and what our current week looks like and how it may have changed over the year. I feel this is appropriate. Our timetable can alter frequently as new opportunities become available or interests develop. I believe in the Bill at present there is potentially a 15 day requirement to advise the LA of any changes to providers 436D (4), which could then lead to families updating the LA several times a year under threat of a potential SAO or greater scrutiny or a fine.

22. I worry that the amount of information required to be shared by other education providers, may also act to put some off from working with home educating children- so in this way the Bill could act to negatively impact on their education.

23. The main value and responsibility of home education is to provide a suitable education for your child. The Bill will exert pressure on families to pander to other people's perception of a suitable education, and it is very likely that the people making these judgments, who as well as not knowing the child as well the parents, are likely to have no experience of the range of approaches used and often have their own preconceived ideas. Teacher training does not equip someone to judge home education, as you are trained to be a school teacher, to understand best practice in a classroom setting. I loved teaching but am aware that my understanding about what learning looks is much deeper and broader since home educating. In the UK, we use the term home education rather than home schooling to underline the fact that education and schooling are not interchangeable.

I really hope that our legal rights to educate our children and the right to a private family life are respected during the scrutiny of this Bill. Thank you for taking the time to read my views and allowing me to share my experiences with you.

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