

HOME EDUCATION IN BIRMINGHAM

Introduction

The education of children in England is the responsibility of parents, either by full-time attendance at school or “otherwise” (referred to here as “home educated”). The Badman report estimated in 2009 that there were between 20,000 and 80,000 children and young people home educated, which implies a figure in Birmingham of between 440 and 1,800 young people.

This paper summarises the initial feedback from engagement with home educating parents in Birmingham over the last six months, and identifies areas for further development.

The Assistant Director for Integrated Services for Young People and Family Support, together with colleagues from SEN Assessment and Educational Psychology, met with a small group of home educating parents and representatives for Education Otherwise (a national home education charity) in October 2010.

A further discussion with a wider group of twenty Birmingham home educating parents took place in February.

In addition, a postal survey of all home educating families known to the Elective Home Education team is underway and interim results were discussed at the February meeting.

Further meetings are planned with home educators to provide an informal “reference group” to inform the Council’s future policy development in relation to these young people and families.

As a result of these meetings, six particular areas have been identified and suggestions for improvement made. At the next meeting on 30th March it would be useful to feedback on whether / how we intend to address these areas and any early progress that can be made before then.

Feedback from October 2010 meeting

At the initial meeting in October, participants raised several issues regarding the relationship between Birmingham City Council and the Home Education community including:

1. **Birmingham City Council already supports HE families effectively in some areas** – eg the community ticket at local libraries and new home education advisors.
2. **Many home educating parents feel that Birmingham LEA historically has not respected their choice to home educate.** Whilst the home education advisors are now good, the rest of the LEA was perceived to be more interested in “getting kids into school” rather than “helping home educating families”. LEA actions which were felt to have exacerbated this perception included:
 - statements to the media falsely linking the Khyra Ishaq case to home education,
 - the formal Birmingham LEA response to the Badman consultation which was perceived to indicate that HE families were incapable of achieving ECM outcomes,
 - the lack of understanding and empathy with home education experience with some truancy sweeps, EWOs and ESWs,
 - historic lack of consultation around BCC guidelines for home education.
3. **The main area of further support that would be helpful is around public examinations.** BCC could create avenues for HE children to access IGCSEs (and GCSE coursework evaluation) as external candidates at selected schools. This would support the council’s key priority of improving employment and helping young people succeed economically.
4. Providing more valued support and ensuring consistent respect for home education would encourage more HE parents to engage constructively with the council, which in turn **would help BCC discharge its duties effectively.**
5. **Special needs support for HE children is an issue of concern.** Some HE parents would welcome more professional input, especially for children with higher levels of special needs. However, the current approach in Birmingham seems to impose unnecessary requirements (eg requiring parents to attend termly review meetings) and perceived threats of escalation to safeguarding procedures if for example review meetings are not attended.

- 6. Some key council workers who are likely to encounter HE children need better awareness training.** These initial contacts heavily influence the HE parent's future relationship with the council. Training courses are available to support this development. In particular:
- Truancy sweeps can feel threatening if staff are unfamiliar with HE. In Sheffield, HE parents provide training sessions for the PupilWatch team.
 - EWOs and ESWs need balance carefully their responsibilities for children's welfare (eg in the case of persistent absence) with the right of parents to choose genuinely to educate at home (including by informal and unstructured approaches) through the proper procedures.

In response to these concerns the Council agreed to:

- hold further meetings with Birmingham home educating parents to understand their perspective and co-produce more positive outcomes.
- review its policy and guidance around home education and to consult with home educating families on these reviews.

As a result a further meeting was held in February 2011.

Feedback from February 2011 meeting

Seventeen Birmingham home educating parents attended the February meeting.

In initial discussion parents emphasised the **many positive aspects of home educating in Birmingham**, including elements of BCC's existing support, including the following:

- **Flexibility** including designing your own programme of education to suit the needs of the child and working at the individual child's pace
- **Support from BCC's Home Education Department** (parents emphasised the importance of the skill and empathy demonstrated by the new advisers appointed in recent years)
- **Communication among local home educators** such as the regular HELM magazine and Yahoo groups; together with regular meetings such as the Centre for the Child
- **Access to city facilities** such as the Birmingham Libraries "community card" system, Birmingham art galleries and museums, Think Tank, historic sites such as Sarehole Mill, ballet and music
- **The diversity of the city** and festivals including events such as The Readers and Writers Festival
- **Local centres for activities** such as Ackers skiing, bush craft and tutors for clay making.

Birmingham home educators **also identified a number of difficulties** in successfully home educating children in the city, including:

1. **Staff training:** some BCC staff such as attendance officers and social workers were felt not to understand Home Education properly – this was a particular concern regarding those with responsibility for early contact with new home educating parents.
2. **SEN:** The review process can be seen as inflexible and at times "bullying"
3. **Examinations:** Difficulties in accessing public examinations (GCSEs)
4. **Alternative Provision:** Difficulties in accessing alternative provision (especially for under 16s) such as Adult Education courses, tutoring, FE college or language courses.
5. **Resources:** Not being able to access facilities such as the resources library at the James Brindley. The lack of financial support, especially around purchasing educational resources and funding GCSE entries was acknowledged as a national issue.
6. **Universal services:** Inconsistency on access to universal services such as local "after school" clubs

In response to these difficulties experienced by HE families, the group brainstormed potential solutions to explore with the Council as follows:

Problem 1: BCC staff training

HE parents would like to see better awareness training for professionals they are likely to come into contact with – including social workers and education welfare officers. This training should cover the council policy and guidance, the law around home education, and an awareness of the diversity of home education approaches. They offered to meet in small groups with these staff to enhance mutual understanding.

Problem 2: SEN

The present approach was viewed as overly bureaucratic and at times bullying – rather than personalising the assessment and review process to the fact that the child is being educated outside school. A review of the SEN guidance relating to home education was suggested.

Problem 3: Examinations

The Council could assist HE pupils to achieve academic success by facilitating the use of local schools and exam centres (eg James Brindley) and making details available to HE parents. It would be useful if these could be financed as Alternative Provision so that finance is not a disincentive to achieving qualifications.

Problem 4: Alternative Provision

The council could consider clarifying and extending the access to alternative provision available to young people (eg aged 14-16) who are educated at home. This could include adult education sessions, for example around art and science; access to FE or language colleges for specific courses. Some HE families would also be interested in flexi-schooling if this was to be offered in the city in future.

Problem 5: Resources

The council could consider making available access to existing teaching resource centres such as the James Brindley library. Community libraries, and the extended “community card” system, are highly valued by home educators in the city.

Problem 6: Universal services

Home educating families are treated differently and inconsistently by schools and other organisers of universal services such as young people’s orchestras and bands, “after school” and “holiday” clubs. It would be helpful to have a Council policy to encourage organisers to open these facilities to local HE pupils, and perhaps to provide any “references” which would usually be provided by schools (eg to access the schools music service).

Other suggestions

The HE community is highly effective at supporting each other through groups and events. The Council can assist this by facilitating communication with other parents on events and activities taking place, for example by signposting new HE parents to existing websites and newsletters.

Participants also offered to co-produce better outcomes with the Council, for example by pre-reading material intended for home educators in the city to provide advice on any likely issues or areas of misunderstanding prior to wider circulation.

Survey of home educators

A postal survey of all 400 home educating families known to the Council was started in February 2011. Nineteen completed questionnaires were returned and this was too few to make any firm conclusions, except to say that responses generally supported the issues raised at the above meetings.

Feedback from March 2011 meeting

A further meeting was held on the 30th of March 2011. Eight home educators attended and discussions centred on the local authority Guidance for Parents document. A brief summary is given below;

- Birmingham Local Authority Policy and Guidance documents: Discussions led to further suggested changes and it was agreed to continue to look at the sections relating to children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Christine Atkinson (who has responsibility for the SEN Assessment Service) has been invited to the next meeting (September the 16th 2011).
- Examinations: John Smail gave an update on progress regarding access to exam centres. Several schools, colleges and alternative provisions are being approached in order to find ways to make the process of taking GCSEs and / or IGCSEs easier for home educators. Most centres are unwilling to accept independent candidates. However, since the meeting, Exams Officers from two alternative education provisions and one secondary school (who do accept independent candidates) have agreed to attend the next meeting in September.
- Training of LA staff with responsibilities involving home educated children: Home educators were invited to volunteer to take part in planned training sessions. The training is having to be postponed until after the current re-structuring of the Education Welfare Service.
- Resources: It was reported that James Brindley School resource centre is closing.
- Two representatives from the Key Team Nurses spoke about the services they could offer home educators. It was agreed not to make joint visits to home educating families (involving an elective home education advisor and a key team nurse), but to better signpost the services available.
- Home Education Survey: Although there had been no more responses, it was agreed to summarise those replies already received.

Home Education Survey February 2011

Summary of Responses

Early in 2011 a questionnaire was sent to every home educating family known to Birmingham local authority in order to help us gain a better understanding of the issues affecting them. Further copies were also sent-out, on request via 3rd parties, so that home educators not known to us could also put forward their views. Completed questionnaires could be anonymous if desired.

Nineteen completed or part-completed questionnaires were returned and we are very grateful to the respondents for their time and consideration.

A summary is given below, the original text and questions are in black and responses and tallies are in blue;

Questionnaire Summary of responses

All the questions below are optional and please answer as many or as few as you wish (or none at all). Please ignore any questions you are not comfortable answering or that you do not feel are applicable to your circumstances or style of home education. There is a box at the end for other comments, should you wish to add any further thoughts, but please add additional sheets where needed.

Your Views

What do you feel are the main benefits of home education?

- 'Freedom from the shackles of an overburdened education system'
- More time with your children
- Learning tailored to individual child
- Security & closer family relationships
- Freedom to explore interests and to develop at own pace
- Friendships outside same-age peer group
- One – one = more efficient learning
- Children retaining love of learning
- Developing independence
- Lack of peer pressure (don't have to worry about being 'cool', no pressure to do wrong)
- No pointless work / homework
- Child can choose who they mix with
- Studying at times that suit you

- Not having to study irrelevant subjects
- Knowing where children are 24/7
- Emphasis on family's own values
- Being part of a supportive community
- Enables a more holistic approach to education
- More outdoor activities
- More time for play

What have been the main challenges of home education?

- Learning to see education differently
- Parent finding time for own life
- Lack of information about exams / exam centres
- Costs
- Finding the right resources on a budget
- Negative attitude towards HE
- Finding suitable social opportunities
- Maintaining a child's motivation
- Lack of direction / targets from the LA
- Lack of support for SEN

Why you Home Educate

Please indicate your main reason(s) for deciding to home educate.

If more than one reason please rate them in order of importance to you

(e.g. 1, 2, 3 ... with '1' being most important); **Score**
order

A personal choice in preference to the school system	1 st
Bullying issues	1 st
Lack of academic progress	3 rd
Learning needs not met	3 rd
Waiting for a school place	5 th
Single sex school wanted, but not available	6 th
Religious needs not met	7 th
Medical needs not met	7 th

Not getting-on with peers	7 th
Poor quality of teachers	7 th

How far do you feel that your decision to home educate was a free choice?

Could you please tick on the scale below;

	Tally
Completely free choice	3
Mainly by choice	2
Decision partly by choice	1
Little choice in the decision	2
No choice at all	3

One respondent commented that there was little choice initially, but that the choice to continue home education was completely free.

The Children

Gender	= Roughly 50 : 50 Boys : Girls
Average age	= 12 (range 5 – 16)
Average length of time HE to date	= 3 1/3 years (range 0 – 11 years)
	Note 10 out of the 14 had been HE for 0-3 years

Your approach to Home Education

Which of the following best describes the way you are providing for your child's / children's education? *We realise that there is a wide range of approaches to home education, but if possible please choose one or more than one from the list, as best fits your child's / children's education.*

If more than one, please rate them roughly in order of time spent

School at home	1 st
Project based	1 st
Autonomous / Child Led	3 rd
Paid for curriculum or distance learning	4 th
Private tutor	5 th

How you find us

The following two questions regard your contact with Birmingham Local Authority. If these questions are not applicable, please skip.

Regarding home education, who made the initial contact from the local authority;

	Tally
Education Social Worker	6
Elective Home Education Advisor	5
Other	0

How did you find this **initial contact** from the local authority?

Please rate the descriptions below according to how strongly you agree or disagree;

The initial contact was..

Helpful Strongly agree (4) mainly agree (4) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Convenient Strongly agree (4) mainly agree (3) mainly disagree (1)
strongly disagree (0)

Friendly Strongly agree (5) mainly agree (2) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Threatening Strongly agree (2) mainly agree (1) mainly disagree (1)
strongly disagree (2)

Acceptable Strongly agree (3) mainly agree (4) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

How have you found the follow-up contact with the Elective Home Education team?

Please rate the descriptions below according to how strongly you agree or disagree;

The contact with the Elective Home Education Team was

Helpful Strongly agree (5) mainly agree (3) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Convenient Strongly agree (4) mainly agree (4) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Friendly Strongly agree (6) mainly agree (2) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Threatening Strongly agree (0) mainly agree (1) mainly disagree (1)
strongly disagree (6)

Acceptable Strongly agree (5) mainly agree (3) mainly disagree (0)
strongly disagree (0)

Are you a member of a formal Home Education group (such as HEAS,
Education Otherwise, Education Everywhere, etc)?

Yes (4) No (7)

Are you a member of any informal / local home education groups?

Yes (7) No (5)

Is there anything currently unavailable to you that would support you in
providing an education for your child / children, now or in the future?

1. Help with GCSEs (by far the most common response)
2. Access to school facilities (eg labs, art, sport)
3. Access to other 'hands-on resources (via school and / or libraries)
4. Flexi-schooling
5. Access to Adult Education classes
6. LA to act as a Contact Point for new home educators
7. Help with transition – School to HE.
8. Financial help, using money that would have gone towards a school education

9. LA to set targets to help home educators monitor their children's progress
10. Travel cost
11. Group tutoring costs

Your views on our Policy document and Guidance for Parents

The local authority has recently revised its policy document and advice & information regarding Elective Home Education. These revised documents and information can be viewed on our website at www.birmingham.gov.uk/home-education. Hard copies are available on request. If you could spare some time to look through these, we would appreciate your comments, if not please skip this questions.

Please rate the statements below according to how strongly you agree or disagree;

Regarding the document 'Elective Home Education – Policy',

The document is useful

Strongly agree (0) mainly agree (5) mainly disagree (1) strongly disagree (0)

It is easy to understand

Strongly agree (0) mainly agree (6) mainly disagree (0) strongly disagree (0)

Additional comments on the 'Elective Home Education – Policy' document;

- Better, but still threatening
- Too much emphasis on LA rights
- Too little emphasis on parents' and childrens' rights (eg the right to refuse access to home, 'work', meeting etc)

- Why do ESWs make first visit? EHE should not be considered a welfare issue

Regarding the information and guidance on the web site (contained in the document 'Elective Home Education – Guidance for Parents', and in the additional information contained in the links under the heading 'Home Education' in the left hand column). Please bear in mind that the information is mainly aimed at those families new to home education;

It is easy to understand

Strongly agree (2) mainly agree (4) mainly disagree (0) strongly disagree (0)

It would be useful to new home educators

Strongly agree (0) mainly agree (5) mainly disagree (0) strongly disagree (0)

Parts may be useful to more experienced home educators

Strongly agree (0) mainly agree (3) mainly disagree (2) strongly disagree (0)

Additional comments regarding the 'Elective Home Education – Guidance',

- Gives impression that the LA wants to get the child back to school
- Gives impression that home visits **will** happen
- The 'checklist' gives impression of a 'things you must do to pass' list
- Needs more specific & detailed guidance for new home educators.
- Needs a website list
- Needs a booklist

Additional comments, on any aspect of home education (please continue on a separate page if required);

- Legacy of past adversarial approach
- Engagement offers no benefit to home educators
- LA gives impression that HE is a problem
- Consultation process is a step in the right direction, but needs to be backed-up with actions
- EHE should be an option on the school preference forms
- More support for SEN children