

# **Exploring the reasons why people home educate in Hertfordshire**

## **Executive Summary**

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# Executive Summary

## 1. Introduction

Home education, that is providing education to children within the home setting rather than within school, is increasing nationally year on year. In England, home education is a legal choice and ongoing monitoring of children is not required if the Local Authority [LA] is satisfied that adequate arrangements for education are in place. The national rise in the number of families deciding to home educate is mirrored within Hertfordshire. When asked to complete a questionnaire on the withdrawal of their child from a school in Hertfordshire, parents/carers are asked to provide a reason for making that decision. For those parents/carers who do, the most frequently selected reason is 'dissatisfaction with the school system'. This is a broad reason that can incorporate many different factors. Indeed, the research literature identifies a myriad of reasons why parents/carers decide to home educate, including, amongst others, concerns about the school environment, special educational needs and disabilities [SEND], additional learning needs [ALN], and philosophical or ideological views. These reasons for home educating are often intertwined and complex; they may vary for each child within a family; and can change over time. While government discourse often refers to 'elective home education' (i.e. EHE), for some parents/carers, home education is not perceived as elective or a positive and desirable choice, rather something that they were compelled to do, due to a combination of different reasons.

## 2. Focus of the research

This study sought to explore the reasons why people home educate in Hertfordshire. The aims of the project were to understand:

- the factors contributing to parents/carers' decisions to home educate their children;
- the challenges and benefits of home educating;
- the support that home educators draw on.

The study was small scale and exploratory in nature. The research was conducted in five phases. The first was a literature review of existing research around home education. Phases two and three were focus groups (n=16 attendees) and interviews (n=15 interviewees) with home educators. These participants were recruited through calls for participation shared via online networks of home educators, and a support group for parents/carers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SEND], some of whom also home educate. Phase four was an online questionnaire (n=77 respondents) that was shared via the same channels indicated above, and via a link sent directly in a letter by the LA to a stratified sample of parents/carers from the LA register of home educators. The final phase involved a small focus group (n=6 attendees) with LA representatives, to bring an alternative lens of individual practitioner experiences on the subject of home education; their reflections do not necessarily represent the official position of the LA. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Hertfordshire's Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority (protocol number: aEDU/SF/UH/03884(2)). The research deals with a topic that is sensitive and the narratives that parents/carers shared about their reasons for home educating were both highly personalised and very individual. To protect the participants from inadvertent identification, the decision was made to not keep these individual stories intact but rather to draw on quotes relating to themes that cut across the data more generically.

While the research was able to reach a range of home educators, the approach to sampling had limitations. The sample was self-selecting as it relied on people volunteering; the data, therefore, may not expose and reflect all the reasons why people home educate, nor the range of people who home educate. The data reported here, then, are not representative or generalisable. They are, however, valuable as they report the lived experiences of home educators faced with the challenges of navigating a different approach to education and reveal some of the complexities of finding support for and the factors which drive people to choose home education.

### 3. Key research outcomes

The key findings from the research are drawn from analysis of the narratives that the participants shared and are evidenced, within the full report, by the voices of home educators themselves through direct quotes. These data, along with existing research literature, are rich and provide compelling support for the following **key messages**.

In terms of the **existing research literature on home education**:

- Home education is not legal in all countries. In countries where it is legal, there are different legal requirements around who can be home educated, who home educates and the extent to which home education is monitored;
- Home education is a legal option in all countries in the UK. In contrast to some countries, ongoing monitoring of home educated children is not mandatory. Parents/carers who have never sent their children to school are not required to register their children with the LA;
- An independent review of home education in England<sup>1</sup> focused particularly on safeguarding issues; some home educators were critical of the report, particularly regarding recommendations relating to monitoring and registration. A recent Private Member's Bill in the House of Lords, consultation and briefing paper<sup>2</sup>, which outline reform proposals have all raised the profile of home education again in the UK. Home education has also received negative press coverage, with strong responses from the home education community;

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<sup>1</sup> Badman G. (2009) *Report to the Secretary of State on the Review of Elective Home Education in England*. Norwich: TSO (The Stationery Office) Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/328186/Review\\_of\\_Elective\\_Home\\_Education\\_in\\_England.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/328186/Review_of_Elective_Home_Education_in_England.pdf) [Accessed: 13.11.18]

<sup>2</sup> Foster D. & Danechi, S. (2019) *House of Commons Library. Briefing Paper Number 5108*, 24 July, Home education in England. London: House of Commons Library. Available at: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05108/SN05108.pdf>. [Accessed 09.09.19]

- The use of the adjective 'elective' in government literature fails to recognise that, for many families, home education is not always a positive choice;
- The total number of children being home educated in the UK is unknown. Estimates range from 40,000-50,000 full-time home educated children in England currently. LAs report a year-on-year growth in home education nationally;
- Research shows a multitude of reasons why parents/carers home educate and many of these reasons are interlinked. Most decisions involve more than one reason, parents/carers may have different reasons for home educating their different children, and parents/carers' reasons may change over time;
- Decisions to home educate raise issues of equality in schools, particularly in relation to Traveller families, children with SEND and highly able, gifted and talented children;
- Some research suggests that parents/carers want more support and acceptance from their LA. Additional support for home education can be found through online information and local support groups.

In relation to the **reasons why parents/carers home educate in Hertfordshire**, based on empirical data:

- The inflexibility of the school system in relation to testing, monitoring, standardised curriculum, approaches to learning and school-start age, which often did not recognise individual differences, influenced decisions to home educate, particularly for parents/carers who felt their children did not fit that system or where parental views of what it means to educate were radically different to the prevailing view within the school setting. These parents/carers felt that home education could better meet their children's needs, as education could be tailored in terms of pace, interest and learning styles.
- Parents/carers who home educated often saw the school environment as not conducive to learning or wellbeing. Some parents/carers reported sustained bullying, limited or negative academic progress, enforced socialisation, lack of resources within schools, teacher attrition and high teacher turnover, and their own experiences of working within education as the reasons for withdrawing their children.
- For parents/carers of children with SEND, there was clear frustration about the lack of support made available for their children while they were in the school system. Obtaining an Education Health and Care Plan [EHCP] was perceived to be difficult, with parents/carers fighting to get the necessary assessments to support their application. Even when an EHCP was in place and requirements clearly set out, parents/carers reported that some schools either chose not to follow the recommendations, or were unable to do so. With a lack of alternative provision (e.g. either no alternatives, or no space in alternative settings), some parents/carers felt that they had no other option than to remove their child from school and home educate.

- For some children, the experience of school was having a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, resulting in extreme physical symptoms, meltdowns and breakdowns. Budget cuts meant that access to professional support was sometimes difficult. Children's negative experiences were also impacting on parents/carers' own mental health.
- Parents/carers sometimes felt that their concerns in relation to SEND and wellbeing were not taken seriously by school staff, leaving them feeling isolated and powerless.
- Pressure to withdraw children from school was felt particularly when schools displayed little attempt to support children; pressure was more acute when families were facing fines for non-attendance, while underlying issues were not addressed. External pressures on schools (e.g. around Standard Assessment Tests [SATs] results, GCSE English and Maths, Attainment 8, attendance) meant that schools might not always be predisposed to supporting children who could impact negatively on their results.
- Some parents/carers, often those who had never sent their children to school, had a strong educational philosophy that was at odds with what was practised within schools. It was recognised that parents/carers who had actively and positively chosen home education were likely to have very different expectations and experiences of home education than those who felt forced into it.
- For a small number of families, parental work, home life, religious beliefs and financial situations meant that home education was a better fit for their lives. Parents/carers who had witnessed positive examples of home education themselves, within their families, or through their friends' experiences, and thus had access to knowledge and support cited this as a reason as to why home education appeared achievable.

And finally, regarding the **benefits, challenges and support for home education**, based on empirical data:

- The needs of the child drove the approach to learning adopted by the home-educating families participating in the research. The child's needs influenced the structure, content and mode of learning. Participants whose children had previously attended school, often reported that their children were much more confident and less anxious working, for example, at their own pace, being self-directed learners or learning in small groups, than when they were in school.
- Regardless of whether they felt they had a choice about home educating their children or not, many of the parents/carers identified flexibility as a key benefit of home educating. Flexibility was defined by participants as the opportunity for their children to access learning that was tailored to their individual needs: what, when and how they learned.
- The home education community was an important source of support for many of the home educators taking part in the research. The community supports the sharing of experiences, signposting of support and resources available, and running workshops or

social events. Social media, such as Facebook, is used extensively for organising learning/social opportunities and staying connected to other home educators.

- Parents/carers of children with SEND often reported struggling to get appropriate support when their children were in school, sometimes even when there was an EHCP in place. Some parents/carers paid for additional specialist support, others relied on being signposted to available resources by different agencies and using a trial-and-error approach to find what worked. When home educating, some parents/carers talked about the difficulties of finding the support to address the learning needs of their child. Some research participants with children with SEND spoke of feeling overwhelmed.
- The financial implications of home educating were reported by most participants as a key challenge. These included loss of income for the parent who was home educating and the cost of, for example, resources, tuition, classes, and travel. Many of the parents/carers identified a need for financial support to cover the cost of home educating.

These findings broadly align with existing research findings, yet the respondents' accounts add rich depth and evidence the many reasons that propel parents/carers to home educate, alongside the benefits and challenges of home education, and the support structures on which home educators draw. The participants responded openly and frankly about their experiences, and their stories reflect the complexity of that decision-making process, the interconnectedness of the reasons, and the layering of experiences that led to a decision to home educate. Parents/carers rarely provided a single reason for their decision; reasons were multifaceted, although the inflexibility of the school system and dissatisfaction with it, along with reported negative experiences of children with SEND and ALN in mainstream education and a lack of alternative or flexible provision, emerged as key themes.

There were parents who had made positive and considered choices to home educate and those who chose home education as a reaction to negative experiences. It was suspected that there may be a third group of parents/carers who posed safeguarding issue by intentionally removing their children from school to avoid scrutiny; such a group did not feature in our sample as it is doubtful that they would have volunteered to participate. Our findings showed that the home educators who participated in this study, whether in that position through a positive choice, or making the best of an unplanned situation, are seeking to make their children's lives better through home education. For these home educators the children's best interests were at the heart of what they do.

#### **4. Learning points for consideration**

The following sets of learning points are presented as actions that could be taken in order to recognise the differences between groups of home educators; create conducive school learning environments for all children; further analyse home education data; support parents/carers in making informed choices about home education; and provide support for home education.

## Recognise different groups of home educators

This research revealed that there were distinctively different groups of home educators. There were parents/carers who had made an informed, positive and often philosophically driven choice. In contrast, other parents/carers had felt compelled to home educate due to a mismatch (for various reasons) between their child and the school environment; it was felt that this group has increased in recent years. Other (often negative) portrayals of home educators, particularly in popular press, were reflected upon by participants. These groups are likely to have different motivations, experiences and needs. The following actions should be considered:

- Recognise that different groups of home educators will have different motivations and experiences and may well require different support, guidance and oversight;
- Appreciate that some parents/carers feel compelled to home educate due to their experiences of the school system and that more flexibility in the system might reduce the numbers deciding to home educate;
- Redress the negative portrayal of home educators in public discourse and the popular press with depictions of the many home educators who prioritise the quality of their children's education.

Further recognition and understanding of the differences between home educators' motivations and experiences will enable the LA to treat them appropriately and proportionately.

## Create conducive school learning environments for all children

A strong theme throughout the research was dissatisfaction with a school system – perceived to be focussed on assessment, targets, and monitoring – that often could not, or did not want to, differentiate how it educated children. Reductions in funding meant that the expertise to stretch and challenge children, or to support those children with SEND or compromised wellbeing, was frequently difficult to access. While changes to the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework<sup>3</sup>, along with the promise of further funding for SEND<sup>4</sup> and increased emphasis on children's wellbeing, could alleviate some of the issues raised, the following actions should be considered:

- Ensure further continuing professional development and training is available to increase the ability of senior leaders and teachers to manage different needs within schools in a context of continued funding constraints;

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<sup>3</sup> DfE (Department for Education) (2019) 'Education Inspection Framework', Guidance 14 May, updated 2 September: Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework#history> [Accessed: 08.10.19].

<sup>4</sup> DfE (Department for Education) (2018) 'New funding to support children with special educational needs', News Story 16 December: Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-funding-to-support-children-with-special-educational-needs> [Accessed: 25.09.19]

- Clearly signpost routes to additional support provision (including outside agencies) that can help children, whether with SEND or not, who are struggling within the school system in order to enable parents/carers to navigate the options available to them;
- Increase alternative provision options, so that parents/carers have other school-based choices for education;
- Provide more flexible approaches to school attendance, where appropriate (e.g. staggered school starts, flex-schooling, part-time attendance).

A more flexible system, that recognises and respects parents/carers' concerns and effectively supports differentiation, might well result in more children remaining within school rather than parents/carers removing their children.

### Further analyse home education data

With the prevalence of home education increasing in Hertfordshire and in England more generally, there is a need to more fully analyse the data on home education nationally, locally and at a school-level. A better understanding of how, where and why home education is happening, will create opportunities to channel interventions, funding or support to address potential triggers. The following actions should be considered:

- At a school level: challenge Trustees and Governors to look more carefully at the incidence of children being withdrawn from schools, identify patterns and address any issues that are raised;
- At a county level: develop a more nuanced understanding of the reasons why people home educate – e.g. through the withdrawal questionnaire and follow up discussions, and with the systematic recording and analysing of that data;
- Nationally: recognise the different kinds of home educators, and the very different motivations and experiences that they have; appreciate that these differences will be influenced by geographical location, socio-economic status, and children's SEND or ALN.

A better understanding of the reasons why parents/carers home educate will indicate where system-wide issues are contributing to decisions to home educate and whether those issues can be minimised and also ensure that adequate support is put in place when parents/carers are making a decision to home educate.

### Support parents/carers to make informed choices about home education

While some parents/carers do make very positive, and often philosophically driven, choices to home educate, some parents/carers do not. For them the decision is the result of an ongoing struggle within the system, pressures to withdraw put on them by others, or following misinformation about the penalties faced by staying within school, or the support that the families will be provided when they home educate. To enable parents/carers to make informed choices, the following actions should be considered:

- Provide access to timely and appropriate advice about alternative options (e.g. flex-schooling, part-time attendance) and the support available for children who, for whatever reason, do not fit easily within their current school;

- Implement 'cooling off periods', which provide parents/carers with time to think about how they respond to situations and to seek appropriate support and guidance in making their final decision to home educate;
- Enable parents/carers to see different perspectives and hear real-life experiences by accessing people who have considered home education and decided not to, those who are already home educating, those whose children have been home educated and then returned to school, and those who found alternative provision.

If parents/carers are better informed about home education, and know where they can find support, guidance, and alternatives, some parents/carers may ultimately decide not to home educate, and if they do, they will be in a better position to provide the education that their child needs.

### **Provide support for and guidance on home education**

While government funding (directly, or indirectly through the LA) is not provided for home education, there are benefits in providing support and guidance for those who decide to home educate. Some parents/carers see home education as a temporary arrangement and intend to re-enter the school system when issues have been resolved; here support can help in the transition back to school. For those who see home education as a more long-term arrangement, signposting to sources of support can facilitate the provision of appropriate education. The following actions should be considered:

- Provide links to resources, support, sessions, clubs and networks available locally, to enable new home educators to identify what is available to help them in their new role;
- Offer ongoing access to EHE advisors, or a cascading of training and support to those parents/carers who want to develop their ability to educate their children;
- Encourage closer collaboration between the home education community and the LA to establish routes to information, guidance, support and networks; reduce mutual mistrust; and to better understand the motivations for and experiences of home education.

Signposting into the established support networks will help reduce isolation for those parents/carers who are home educating (whether temporarily or permanently). Knowledge of and access to support available will also help those who are seeking to reintegrate their children into school.

## **5. Final reflections**

While the majority of families in Hertfordshire enter their children into the school system, where they stay for the length of their compulsory education, there is an increasing number of parents/carers who, for different reasons, are not following that route. During this research we have spoken to a some of those families and heard their reasons for home educating, the challenges they face, the benefits they gain and the support they draw upon. The report does not purport to represent all home educators and their motivations for home educating, it does feature, however, the lived experiences of families who have made this decision and raises important learning points that should be considered, and actioned, where appropriate, in order to

provide greater understanding of and support for such families as they seek to home educate their children.