



The home education charity
Different and Equal

Home Education Trends: The Covid Effect



Wendy Charles-Warner

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Following on from publication of our preliminary report on trends in home education, this report examines continuing trends in parental choice to home educate their children and how Covid 19 arrangements have affected those choices.

Home educating families tell us that narratives around home education have shown signs of increasing positivity during school closures, with some indications of recent greater acceptance of the fact that home education and school education are different and equal.

The tide of media reporting mentioned in our previous report has slowed, but not stemmed, with increasing emphasis and hyperbole around the number of children coming new to home education. Parents tell us of their frustration that this centres around negativity in respect of home education as a choice, rather than putting recognised problems within the school system at the forefront.

Ministers, Members of both houses and public bodies continue to propound the narrative of rising numbers of home educated children as a concern. Promises of mandatory registration continue to be made in advance of analysis of the consultation on the issue; home educating families and academics alike describe the consultation as ancillary to a decision already made.

Against this background, it has been interesting to see an increased awareness on the part of Government and some public bodies, of the need to address the ever-widening divide between home educating families and local authorities, a divide originating from widespread loss of trust and confidence in those public bodies.

Much has been said by stakeholders about the need for research to support decision making and rightly so; legislative changes must be based on a solid foundation of need supported by evidence and must not proceed without a sound basis.

Research does exist, data is available, the facts and figures can be provided and this report updates the bank of reliable, available information.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. Charles-Warner".

Wendy Charles-Warner
Chair, Education Otherwise

Executive summary

This report examines the availability of accurate home education data, finding that:

- Data was collated from all 151 local authorities in England, providing an exceptional degree of accuracy.
- 38% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children. These parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school.
- On the 7th January 2021 there were 82,169 home educated children in England, a rise from 1st October 2020 (69,791) of 17.73%.
- On 12th April 2021 the total number of home educated children was 83,974, demonstrating clear plateauing of numbers from 7th January 2021.
- Numbers of children coming new to home education in January 2021 were highest amongst 5 year olds and those at transition stage.
- Findings indicate large numbers of parents delaying school entry, rather than choosing home education as a long term option.
- Covid 19 fears of school return remain, but confidence in vaccinations and safe arrangements appear to be increasing.
- Media and public body hyperbole continue to be inaccurate, misleading and framed in unsupported narratives of concern, with little attention being given to reasons to home educate inherent within school failures.
- Parents seek recognition of home education as a different and equal essential choice for many children.

Accurate data is available, but much published data is inaccurate.

Divides between home educating families and public bodies have increased to unprecedented levels in recent years. Those divides are based in loss of trust which public bodies must act to regain in the best interests of home educated children.

The background

Home education has always been and remains a legal choice for parents in England and Wales, a choice which is of equal legal status to school education.

The Education Act 1996 s7

*The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable—
(a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
(b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise’.*

Successive proposals have been made in recent years to introduce registration and/or monitoring of home educated children, on the basis that they are at purported safeguarding risk. These calls for close oversight continue to use the suggestion that these children are ‘invisible’, or ‘unseen’, to make them our modern day ‘Folk Devils’ of Cohen’s seminal work¹. Home educating families attribute this to a process of ‘othering’, which leads to stigmatisation and feelings of inequity. Conroy² attributes this process to ‘*social anxieties and the effects of populism*’, but amongst home educating families a sense of professional ‘gaslighting’ and institutional confirmation bias pervades.

On 2 April 2019, the Government launched a consultation entitled ‘*Children not in School*’ which ran to 24 June 2019. This consultation sought views on the introduction of a mandatory register for home educated children, which would place a duty upon parents to register their children with their local authority. The submissions to this consultation and its final report are yet to be published. However, a short overview³ was published in December 2020, which confirms that the majority of the 5,000 responses to the consultation were from individuals.

What is argued by home educating families and is clear from this publication, is that the Government always intended to introduce a register for home educated children, regardless of the views expressed in submissions it received to its various

¹ Cohen, S (1972) ‘Folk Devils and Moral Panics’. [Online] Available from:

https://infodocks.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/stanley_cohen_folk_devils_and_moral_panics.pdf

² Conroy, J.C. (2010) ‘The State, Parenting, and the Populist Energies of Anxiety’. *Educational Theory*, 60(3,) p. 325-340. [Online] Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2010.00361.x>

³ DfE (2020) ‘Department for Education: Submission of Evidence for Education Select Committee inquiry into Home Education (2020)’ DfE [Online] Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/18392/html?fbclid=IwAR3Qadm44JMCIdEbeNfSZqSreaus9MOu73eO7XOtU6U_3QIAT-tN8dBfDak

consultations. These home educating families also point to the title of the consultation, '*Children not in School*' to argue that this indicates that an institutionally negative attitude is held by Government in respect of home education. These are children who are **in home education**, rather than children who are '*not in school*'; no public body would describe school children as '*children not in home education*'. This is often an unconscious bias, but one which together with perceptions of pre-decided outcomes inherent within media statements, leads home educating families to lose trust in public bodies.

Home educating families have expressed increasing concern in respect of statements by MPs, Ministers and public officials, which are viewed as prejudicing consultation outcomes. In June 2021, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said he was "*absolutely committed*" to a register of home-educated children, going on to state that the introduction was imminent⁴. As recently as 21st July 2021 Baroness Berridge, The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education stated: "*We remain committed to a form of registration for children not in school...*"⁵ again, in advance of publication of the consultation findings.

This report examines ongoing trends in numbers of home educated children since publication of our preliminary report⁶ in December 2020.

Method

This report examines trends in numbers of home educating families in England. Data was obtained by sending freedom of information requests to each of the 151⁷ local authorities in England. Each request was followed up in order to obtain a 100% response rate. The rationale for this, is that the wide range of local authority population sizes results in a wide range of numbers of home educating children across local authorities, making extrapolation from a sample population unreliable and misleading. All outliers were rechecked to ensure accuracy.

⁴ Williamson, G, Cited in Hattenstone, A. and Lawrie, E. (2021) '*Covid: Home-education numbers rise by 75%*' BBC. [Online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-57255380>

⁵ Baroness Berridge speaking in the House of Lords. [Online] Available from: https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/3ceb7919-d1e6-4be0-8f18-294aebf53777?in=12%3A28%3A31&out=12%3A39%3A06&fbclid=IwAR1oLG3QK0myZ_azdorcRU9UHcFGV5aXVN7AU-Kji8BPMtV7BklrHBQYZX8

⁶ Charles-Warner, W (2020) '*Home Education Trends, Preliminary Report*'. Education Otherwise [Online] available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Report-home-education-Trends-preliminary-report.pdf>

⁷ During the period of data collation Northamptonshire split into two separate authorities, for continuity purposes, the figures for both new authorities were amalgamated.

Data for previous years is taken from annual freedom of information requests collated by the researcher. Prior to 2019, full follow up to obtain 100% response rate was not always undertaken. Where data is missing in these years for an individual local authority, the number for the nearest available year is substituted in order to obtain the most reliable available figure.

During March 2021, a survey of 500 parents coming new to home education since 1st January 2021 was undertaken across the same home education groups as surveyed in the preliminary report. The child's age was sought in this survey.

Reasons for home education

The preliminary report found that only 0.48% of parents cited off rolling as a main reason for home educating their child, the March 2021 figure for off rolling had reduced to 0.21%.

Religious and cultural beliefs were cited at 0.41%, a similar level to the preliminary report (0.3%), with those parents who did so referring to safeguarding their child's best interests, by choosing to home educate their children:

'My children were being indoctrinated into a single way of thinking.'

'I don't want him to lose his Muslim and national identity.'

'My family is pagan and the catholic school staff discriminated against my child.'

As in the preliminary report, 38% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children. 7.61% of parents felt the school curriculum was not suitable, a rise from the previous report at 6.25%. General dissatisfaction with the school system was cited at 11.52%, a drop from 14.98%; the school being unable to meet the child's special needs was cited by 14.20% of parents, a rise from 10.15%; lack of school places was cited at 1.03% and bullying at school 3.50%. As with the preliminary report, these parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school, particularly for special needs children being '*ignored*', being physically restrained, or being unsupported. Parents also referred to lack of accommodation for disabilities in Covid 19 arrangements. As with the preliminary report, it is this category and bullying upon which parents provided commentary most frequently:

'My daughter and I were victims of racist bullying at the school including from teachers.'

'A teacher at my child's school was caught grooming the children.'

'An older boy groped my daughter's breast and put his hand up her skirt. The teacher ignored her when she complained.'

'My SEN son was targeted by drug dealing gangs trying to recruit him.'

'Other children treated her mental illness as a reason to persecute her.'

The most commonly cited reason for choosing to home educate a child in the preliminary report was that home education provides a better education than school (20.74%). This figure was lower during March at 15.84%. Notable differences in numbers making this response by age remained, with the start of compulsory school age being the most usual time for this reason to be cited and a slight increase at school transition age (Fig:1).

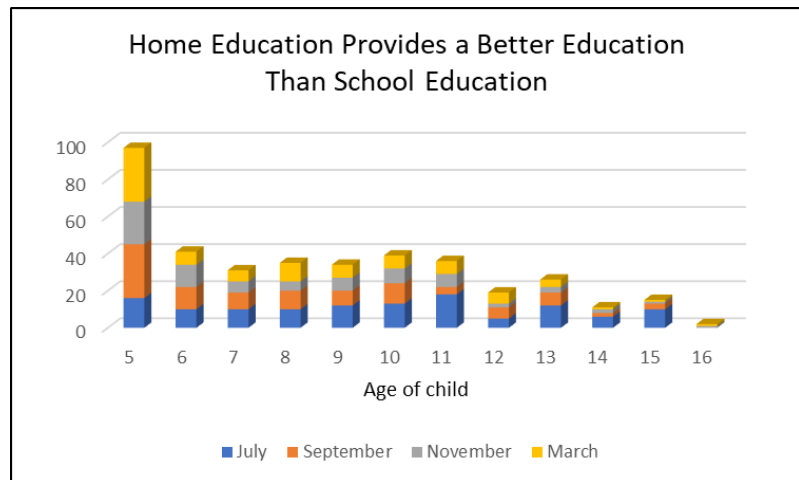


Fig 1: Home education is better than school education, by age.

The number of parents citing health needs (Fig.2), including the child's mental health, rose from 12.82% to 18.31%. Where parents clarified their health concerns, these remained primarily related to anxiety and children's mental health, usually amongst older children. Notably, comments made by parents indicated a possible greater concern about health than the data indicates, specifically concerns relating

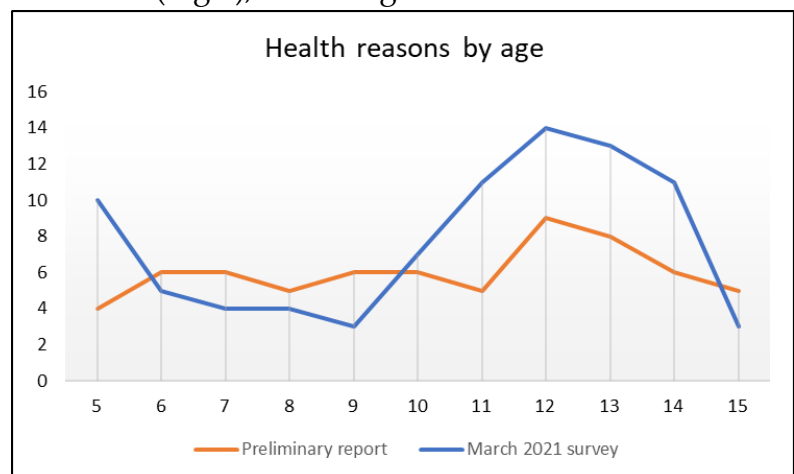


Fig. 2: Health reasons for home educating by age

to Covid 19 and attendant arrangements, particularly at school starting age and for transition stage children:

'I let my 5 year old start school and she brought Covid 19 home to the whole family, my baby and my disabled older child were extremely ill. Why would I put us through that again?'

'I just don't want any further disruption to my son's education.'

'He is awaiting a vaccination before he can go to school.'

'I just won't let her go from one huge 'bubble' to another one. It's ridiculous.'

'I just don't think that bubbles of hundreds of children are safe.'

'Children are wearing cloth masks that are never washed and I don't want him exposed to infection like that.'

'The arrangements just don't allow for ASD children's needs.'

'We decided to delay her starting school as why risk it when we do not have to?'

The 38% of parents who referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children, together with this continuing high level of concern for children's mental health, support the view that parents are choosing home education in order to support their children's best interests.

Numbers of parents citing Covid 19 lockdown as giving them the opportunity to see how much their child thrived learning at home, rose from 15.09% to 18.31%. This rise is borne out by comments made by callers to the Education Otherwise helpline over the period, many of whom referred to their child's happiness increasing during lockdown, their child performing better academically, or both. Lockdown has provided families with an opportunity to 'trial' home education and many appear to have recognised the benefits of home education for their child.

The survey and subsequent observation also brought to light a worrying trend in misinformation. This is targeted at home educating parents by groups who perpetuate a myth of 'common law rights' based on misrepresentation of the Magna Carta. Three participants in the survey referred to aspects of this misinformation as a secondary consideration in their decision making. Concerns expressed by these

parents included the fear of forced vaccination, children being made ‘possessions’ of the ‘State’ and children being taken from the parent’s care. This issue highlights the need for high quality, factually accurate information to be shared with parents, in order to provide reassurance in public bodies and contribute to the rebuilding of trust in those public bodies. Whilst these parents may well be misguided, they nonetheless made their choices in what they considered to be the best interests of their children.

How many home educated children are there?

This report, like the preliminary report, relies upon data that is accurate, informative and complete. Public bodies continue to rely upon figures from the ADCS⁸, which figures are demonstrably inaccurate. This is perpetuated by media hyperbole.

All 151⁹ local authorities responded to the Freedom of Information (FOI) request and outliers were checked for accuracy. Dates chosen coincided with term dates for schools. This accurate measure gives a total for home educated children as at 7th January 2021 of 82,169, a rise from 1st October 2020 (69,791) of 17.73%. On 12th April 2021 the total number of home educated children was 83,974, a rise of 2.2% from 7th January 2021 (Fig:3).

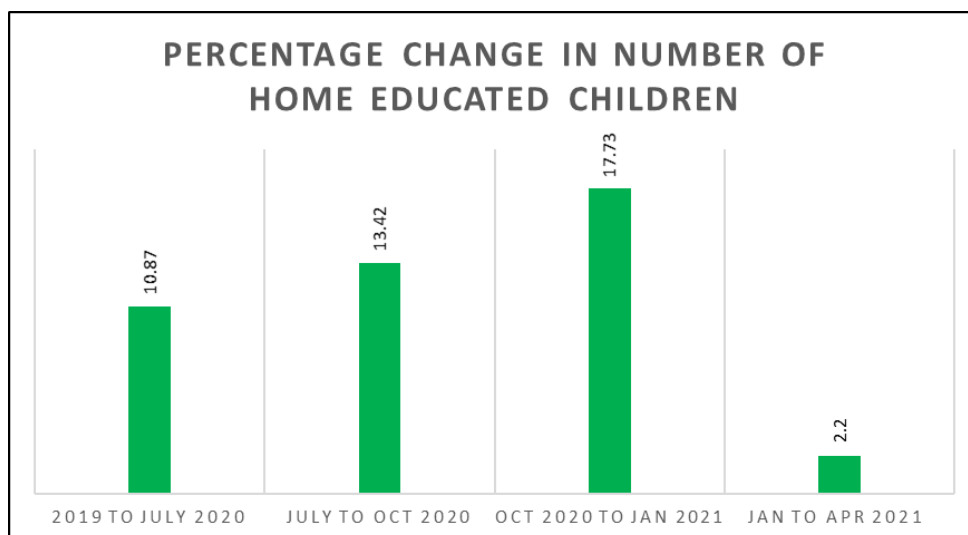


Fig. 3: Percentage change in numbers of home educated children in England.

⁸ ADCS (2020) ‘Elective Home Education Survey 2020’ ADCS. [Online] Available from <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2020>

⁹ See 7.

Whilst numbers rose at a higher rate than previously experienced during October 2020 to January 2021, this plateaued by April 2021, with 47 (31%) local authorities reporting reductions in numbers during that period (Fig.4).

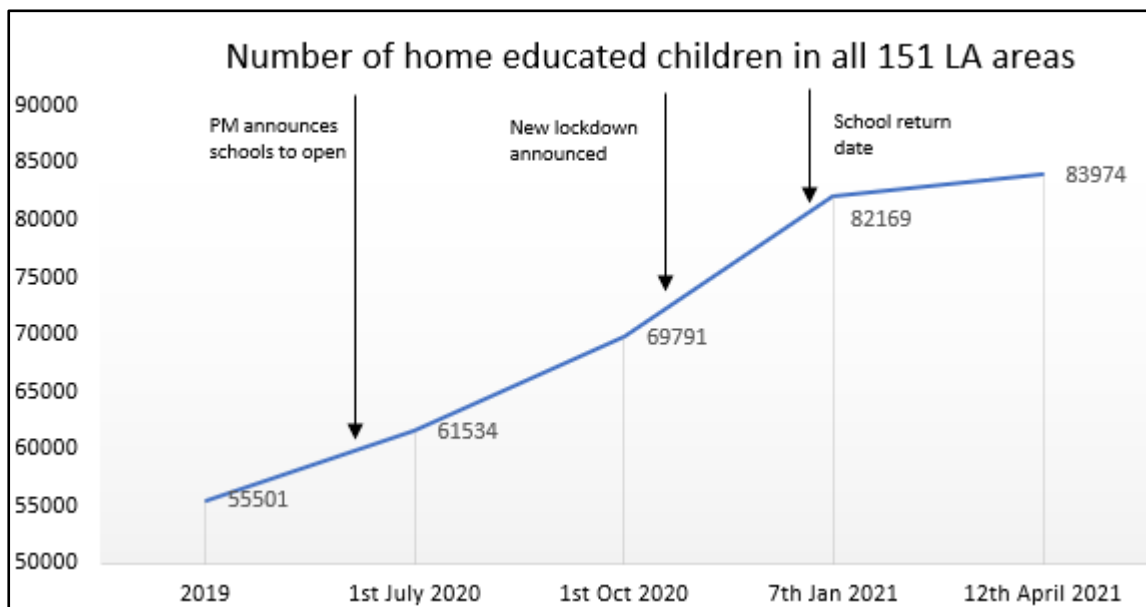


Fig.4: Number of home educated children in all 151 local authority areas.

These trends in rises coincide with significant dates on the Covid 19 timeline¹⁰: The Prime Minister (PM) announced that schools would reopen on 1st June 2020 and this coincided with increasing level of contact with Education Otherwise from parents considering home education; during late August that level of contact reached a peak of approximately 10- 12 times the normal daily contact rate. By September 2020, the rise in numbers appeared to be settling, until 31st October, when the PM announced a second lockdown. This heralded the start of a new wave of enquiries which peaked in the first few days of January 2021, following the PM’s announcement that all children must return to school.

The preliminary report found that Covid 19 had given parents the opportunity to dip their toes in the waters of home education, but that some fears of school return remained. These 2021 findings show a clear correlation between Covid 19 arrangements for schools and numbers of parents coming new to home education.

The highest rate of children coming new to home education between October 2020 and January 2021 was in those aged 5 and rising 5, who would be due to commence school in January 2021. The second highest rate was at the transition phase from

¹⁰ Institute for Government analysis (2021) ‘Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021’ [Online] available from: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf>

junior to senior school at age 11 years. It is quite usual for the numbers of new to home education children to be high at age 5, as these numbers will include those children whose parents choose home education as a lifestyle choice, rather than as a response to negative perceptions of school. However, in January 2021 the peaks at age 5 and transition were more pronounced than normally expected. (Fig:5).

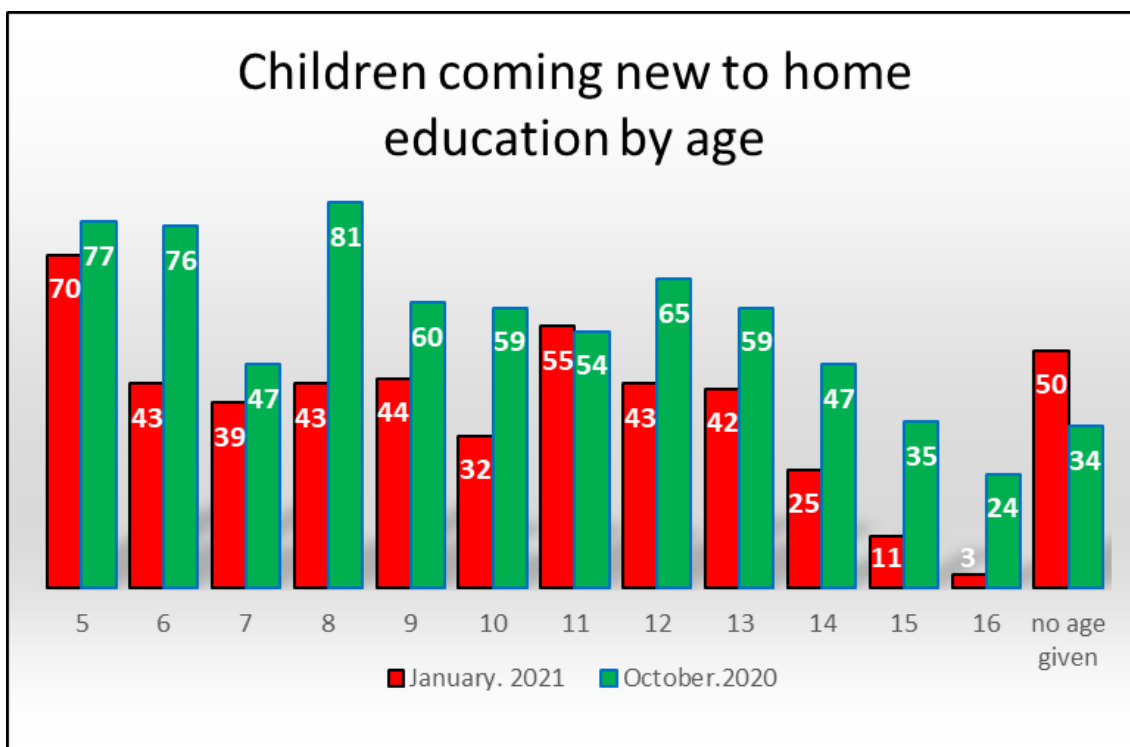


Fig:5. Children coming new to home education by age.

Anecdotal evidence from parents contacting Education Otherwise and home education support groups, indicates that a significant number of those who chose to home educate children newly of compulsory school age, or at transition stage, made the choice to delay school rather than to home educate in the longer term.

This evidence indicates that this short term choice to home educate is primarily based on parental perception of safety from Covid 19 in schools and in some cases, difficulties with the arrangements made to address the virus. Social media home education support groups for 'temporary during Covid 19' home educating families, include in excess of 9,000 parents, indicating a possible move into the school system of a large number of children once parents' confidence in Covid 19 school arrangements improve and fears of viral transition diminish. 88% of adults in the UK have received their first vaccination, with 69.9% having received their second vaccination¹¹. The plateauing of overall numbers of home educated children

¹¹ Gov.Uk (2021) 'Vaccinations in United Kingdom'. [Online] Available from: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/vaccinations>

from January to April 2021, may be indicative of rising parental confidence in respect of overall safety from Covid 19 as vaccination levels rise, with a possible element of normalisation of Covid 19 coping strategies.

Lies, damned lies and statistics

There is no doubt that numbers of home educated children have risen in recent years especially during 2020 to 2021, plateauing between January and April 2021. It is important that this issue is revisited as we move forward toward normality from Covid 19, in order to ensure that policies, practice and legislation are based on accurate data. What is equally important is that we use accurate data when assessing numbers of home educated children.

Reliance by public bodies on inaccurate data published by the ADCS¹² gives an exaggerated impression of actual numbers of home educated children. This inaccurate impression is exacerbated by media hyperbole, which in turn contributes to the widening divide of trust between home educating families and public bodies, particularly as rising numbers are framed as a concern, specifically a safeguarding concern:

'Numbers of home educated children rose in Leicestershire and Leicester at 30% and 12%.¹³

In fact, numbers of home educated children in Leicestershire and Leicester dropped by 0.75 and 7.7% in the first school term of 2021.

Similar claims of high rises in numbers have been made by the BBC which are not supportable:

'The number of children registering for home education in the UK rose by 75% in the first eight months of the current school year, according to BBC research¹⁴.

In fact, overall numbers rose from 69,791 on 1st October 2020 to 83,974 on 12th April 2021, a rise of 20.32% in that period. If we take the figure for 2019 to April 2021, the

¹² ADCS (2020) 'Elective Home Education Survey 2020' ADCS. [Online] Available from <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2020>

¹³ Dayman, A. (2021) 'BBC Sounds' [Online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p09mvk87>

¹⁴ Williamson, G, Cited in Hattenstone, A. and Lawrie, E. (2021) 'Covid: Home-education numbers rise by 75%' BBC. [Online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-57255380>

rise is still only 51.30%, considerably lower than the BBC states it to be. It would appear that the BBC has misunderstood home education both in practice and legally; home educated children could not have been '*registering for home education*' (nor would their parents), as the procedure for a parent wishing to home educate a child registered at school, is to notify the school in writing that the child is home educated¹⁵. It would also appear that the BBC meant to refer to the number of children whom parents have notified schools that they are home educating, or possibly the number of children coming new to home education of which authorities have become aware. Unlike reports from academics working within the field of home education, media reports such as the BBC's overlook the fluid and dynamic nature of the data, as numbers fluctuate as a result of children moving into and out of home education.

In the period following initial removal from the school roll, many parents have a change of mind and return the child to school within a short timescale. This fluidity has been heightened by the publication by the DfE in October 2020, of a letter to all local authorities in England entitled: '*Elective Home Education (EHE): Your duties, our expectation*¹⁶', in which it instructed schools to arrange a meeting with parents immediately following the school becoming aware of the parent's intention to home educate their child. The apparent purpose of these meetings is to 'weed out' and seek to dissuade parents from home educating their child where it may not be in the child's best interests. However, schools do not normally become aware of a parent's intention to home educate the child until they receive a notice stating that the child is home educated. Consequently, schools have arranged meetings in the early stages of home education, often presenting them as mandatory. Data is not available for the number of parents being dissuaded by this system from home educating their child after a short period, but from anecdotal evidence it seems highly likely that these numbers are significant. Clearly, researchers cannot look only at numbers of children coming into home education at a given time, without cross referencing numbers going into school from home education. In addition, other factors affect the apparent increases in numbers such as greater diligence in recording by local authorities.

For many families, the initial decision to home educate the child is as a result of negative perceptions of school, including lack of SEN provision, bullying and dissatisfaction with the curriculum. These families question the presentation of their choice to home educate as a concern relating to home education, as opposed to that concern being attributed to what they consider the failure of schools to properly

¹⁵ Education (Pupil Registration)(England) Regulations 2006 s8 (1)(d)

¹⁶ DfE (2020) '*Elective Home Education (EHE): Your duties, our expectations.*' [Online] Available for example from: <https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/Documents/schools-children/EHE-your-duties-our-expectations.pdf>

safeguard their child’s needs. This perception applies equally to those choosing to home educate as a result of concerns in respect of Covid 19 arrangements. Schools are not ideal and they cannot meet the needs of every child. Furthermore, schools are not the benign and protective institutions that public bodies and those with statutory safeguarding powers present them to be:

‘Schools play an essential role in protecting children from abuse. They have regular contact with children and young people so are in a strong position to identify signs of abuse and neglect.’¹⁷ (NSPCC)

‘A helpline launched for victims to report abuse and harassment in educational settings has taken hundreds of calls since it opened on 1 April...It is being run by the children’s charity the NSPCC.’¹⁸

A recent OFSTED review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges¹⁹ found that 92% of girls reported incidents of sexist name-calling and 79% reported sexual assaults amongst other forms of sexual abuse (Fig:6). Young people reported that these incidents were so commonplace as to be normalised by peers.

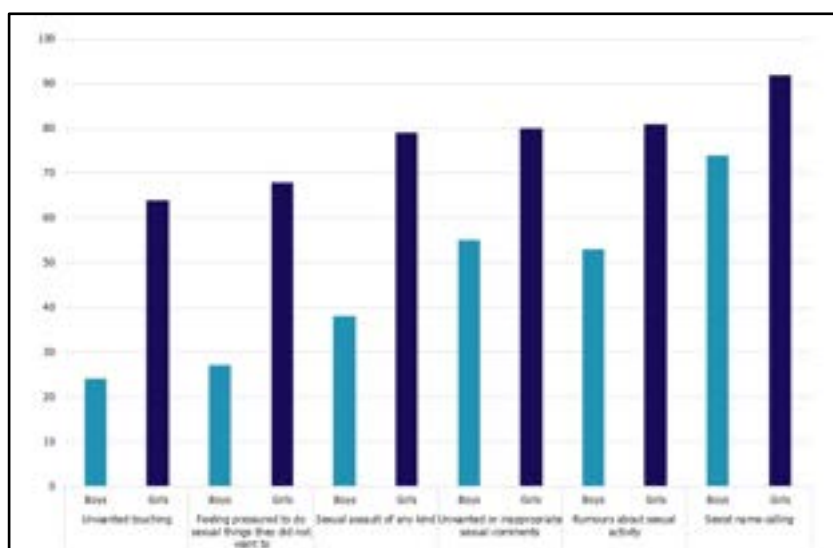


Fig:6. Reported sexual offences in schools. Source: OFSTED

For many children school is ideal, just as for many children home education is ideal. For some children school is protective, just as for many children home education is protective. Some parents come to home education not as a real choice, but because they want to safeguard their child from risks and failings experienced within the school system. Numbers of home educated children would almost certainly be

¹⁷ NSPCC (2021) ‘Safeguarding and child protection in schools.’ [Online] Available from: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection-schools>

¹⁸ BBC (2021) ‘Abuse helpline takes hundreds of calls, says NSPCC’ 24th May 2021, BBC news [online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-57226577?fbclid=IwAR2TdKRPEDx6sITYRlcZ7NTaaCsjYb07H5GuY1oSm9XRgxz2is0ghC1Ur74>

¹⁹ Ofsted (2021) ‘Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges’ [Online] Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges#what-did-we-find-out-about-the-scale-and-nature-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools>



lower if schools did not suffer from these shortcomings. However, parents rightly point out that many more children could benefit from being home educated if that choice was openly publicised, treated with respect and recognised as being different and equal in practice and in legislation.

Conclusions

This report examines accurate data on numbers of home educated children in England, finding public body and media presentation of that data to be flawed, at times to such a degree as to render it misleading. Published data consistently overstates the numbers of children who are home educated, most usually because researchers do not access full information, or misunderstand the fluidity of home educating numbers.

This report provides clear and cogent evidence of why parents choose to home educate their children, in many cases as a result of failings on the part of the school system, but with indications of recent numbers choosing to delay entry into school through a temporary choice to home educate in the face of Covid 19.

This research found Covid 19 to have had a significant effect on the numbers of home educated children, most notably during the expected 'peak' period of late August through to the Autumn half term, with numbers plateauing between January and April 2021. There is clear correlation between important dates within the Covid 19 timeline and rises in numbers of home educated children, but signs that improved vaccination rates and normalisation of Covid 19 measures may be slowing the rise.

Parents continue to lack trust in public bodies and the media, highlighting the framing of numbers of home educated children in a narrative of concerns, despite compelling evidence that schools are not necessarily benign places of learning.

This report builds upon findings in the preliminary report to pave the way forward for constructive, fact based dialogue between home education stakeholders. This would better serve the cause of closing the divide between home educating families and public bodies, a divide which lends more to misunderstanding and 'othering' than it does to factual matters; a divide which need not exist.

Research exists and it is persuasive. We remain open to building bridges of mutual respect in the best interests of home educated children.

W. Charles-Warner July 2021

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