



EDUCATION OTHERWISE

Different and equal

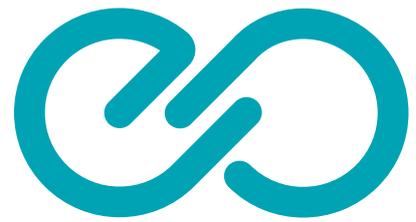
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Home education

What support would home educating families welcome?





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Preface

At the heart of any successful support for our children's future wellbeing are consistent good relationships, not only for our children, but also when dealing with third parties who have a legitimate interest in their welfare.

'Regulation impacts on child wellbeing and...home educators take different motivational postures based on a range of factors, of which their relationship with the regulator is one.' (Krogh and Liberto, 2021)

Legislation provides public bodies with a measure of legitimate interest in the welfare of our children and relationships between home educating families and public bodies have been increasingly fraught over the last decade, with mutual distrust being evident. The recently published report from the Education Select Committee has not helped.

At Education Otherwise we firmly reject adversarial approaches, the narrative must change. We must build a mutually trusting and respectful future for all home educating families. To do otherwise would not be in the interest of our children. Support is key; parents want to provide a suitable education for their children and education staff can and want to support those parents to do so.

What has not been available to date, is information about what support parents would welcome and how providing that support would raise mutual trust and respectful engagement between education staff and home educating families. This report goes a long way to providing this information.

We very much hope that public bodies will welcome this report and we in turn, welcome any opportunity to build positive relationships with those public bodies.



Wendy Charles-Warner
Co-Chair, Education Otherwise

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About Education Otherwise

From a modest start made by a small group of parents in 1977, Education Otherwise Association (EO) has grown to become a well-respected and vibrant registered charity, supporting and providing information to home educating families in England and Wales, feeding into policy decisions associated with home education, and education in general, helping to shape the narrative that define what is meant by education.

Our name comes from the Education Act, which states that parents are responsible for their children's education, 'either by regular attendance at school or otherwise' and we work to raise public awareness of the fact that education is compulsory, but school is not.

Our aim is to support and promote the rights of parents and guardians to provide their children with the best education for each of them, as individuals; by attending school or otherwise.

Introduction

Relationships between home educating families and public bodies have been increasingly fraught over the last decade, with mutual distrust being evident: parents feel beleaguered by repeated demands for close monitoring of their home education provision and local authority officers feel impotent when seeking to fulfil their duties in respect of home education. The recently published report from the Education Select Committee¹ has not helped, highlighting as it does the desire on the part of the Committee to wield 'sticks' against those families, whilst offering a meagre 'carrot' of '*removing barriers of cost and distance to exam entry for EHE children.*'

This research has been informed by the Education Otherwise 'Kit award', a scheme to recognise excellent service to home educating families by their local authority education staff. The Kit award was developed by the charity as an important first step toward increasing mutual trust and engagement, using the approach that 'Kit' (an anonymous education officer) had introduced.

One primary aspect which is lacking in this debate, is understanding of what support home educating families actually want. With this information, local authorities will be better able to direct funding and resources toward developing support services that are welcomed by families and consequently, likely to aid those authorities to more productively fulfil their duties. This research seeks to address that omission.

Method

An anonymous survey was developed to seek responses from home educating families in respect of how often they would engage with a range of support offers, if those offers were made available to them by the local authority. The survey was publicly accessible and circulated on a wide range of home education support groups. Respondents were asked to confirm that they were home educating adults and a facility for free text suggestions was included.

Respondents were asked to grade suggested support options by their level of probable engagement. Questions relating to Welsh language provision and special needs provision, being only applicable to a set subsection of the cohort, allowed the respondent to elect for 'not applicable'. Only data from those for whom this support is applicable was used in these cases.

Respondents were also asked to confirm that they had agreed to take part in the survey. A total of 554 responses were received, of which 19.75% were from Wales. Two forms were uncompleted and discarded, leaving 552 complete responses.

Results

Parents were asked to answer questions relating to specific suggested support and also to indicate if they had any other suggestions in respect of support and engagement. The question seeking other suggestions received a significant number of replies, of which 23.28% included reference to concerns that any support would come at a 'cost':

¹ House of Commons Education Committee (2021) 'Strengthening Home Education' [Online] Available from: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmeduc/84/8404.htm>

'Would be incredibly apprehensive in accepting ANY help from LA as I would expect them to want to interfere with the home education provisions parents have put in place.'

'My concerns would be that in return for paid for exams what we have to sacrifice or change to meet criteria? What hoops would we be made to jump through?'

'I might not engage with if it was being organised by the LA due to lack of trust in the motives of the LA. I would engage if the people or organisations organising it had my trust.'

'If the LEA was paying for the exams, might they want to control how the education was delivered or place other Conditions, restrictions or a requirement for increased 'monitoring' on families?'

'I'm fairly new and have been so disappointed in their approach, I started out open to communication but now I am very reluctant. I do not trust them at all.'

'If the LA were hostile in any way, I would not accept anything from them.'

It is quite clear from the responses received to this question that a primary requirement in raising engagement is that trust needs to be built up and developed between local authority staff and home educating families. Mutual trust is an inherent ingredient of any supportive relationship and where we have found high levels of mutual respect and trust, engagement is considerably higher.

In cases where the respondent indicated that they did not trust the local authority, a disproportionate number of questions were answered to state that support, even valuable and desired support, would not be taken up. Results must be considered in this context.

Specific suggested support overview

Individual support questions relate to local authorities making arrangements for each surveyed type of possible support, for local home educating families. Results have been separated into two categories due to stark differences in responses between categories which provide 'added value' to home educating parents and those which are perceived as assessment or monitoring.

Categories which received minimal prospect of engagement related to support perceived by home educating families as monitoring or assessing their provision. Categories for the child meeting the local authority for assessment; the child meeting the authority to express their views, wishes and feelings; assessment of the child's work samples and assessment of parental reports all received fewer than 3% of responses indicating engagement regularly or every time (Fig. 1).

All categories of support perceived as providing added value were positively welcomed by respondents. Highest levels of prospective engagement were reported for the funding of examinations (76.18%), providing access to college courses (66.41%) and providing examination venues (66.42%). Lowest level of prospective engagement every time, or regularly was reported for the provision of lesson plans (10.86%) and worksheets (18.66%), (Fig. 2).

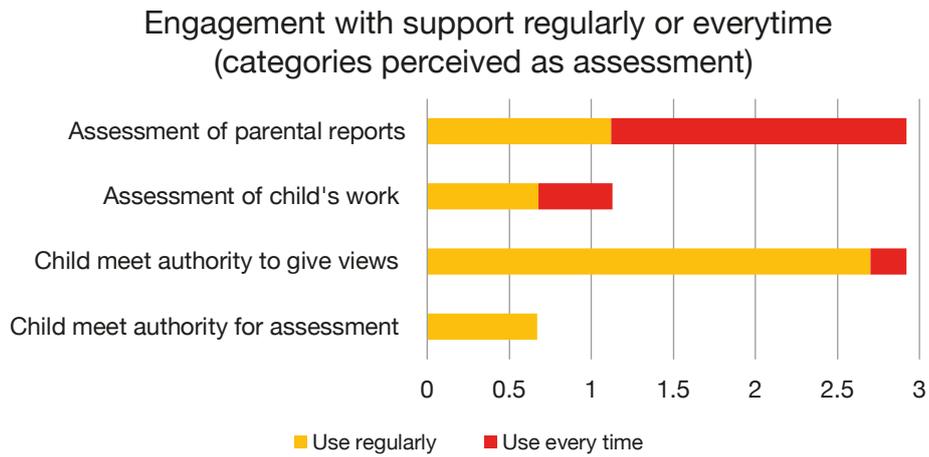


Fig. 1 Engagement with assessment categories of support by percentage

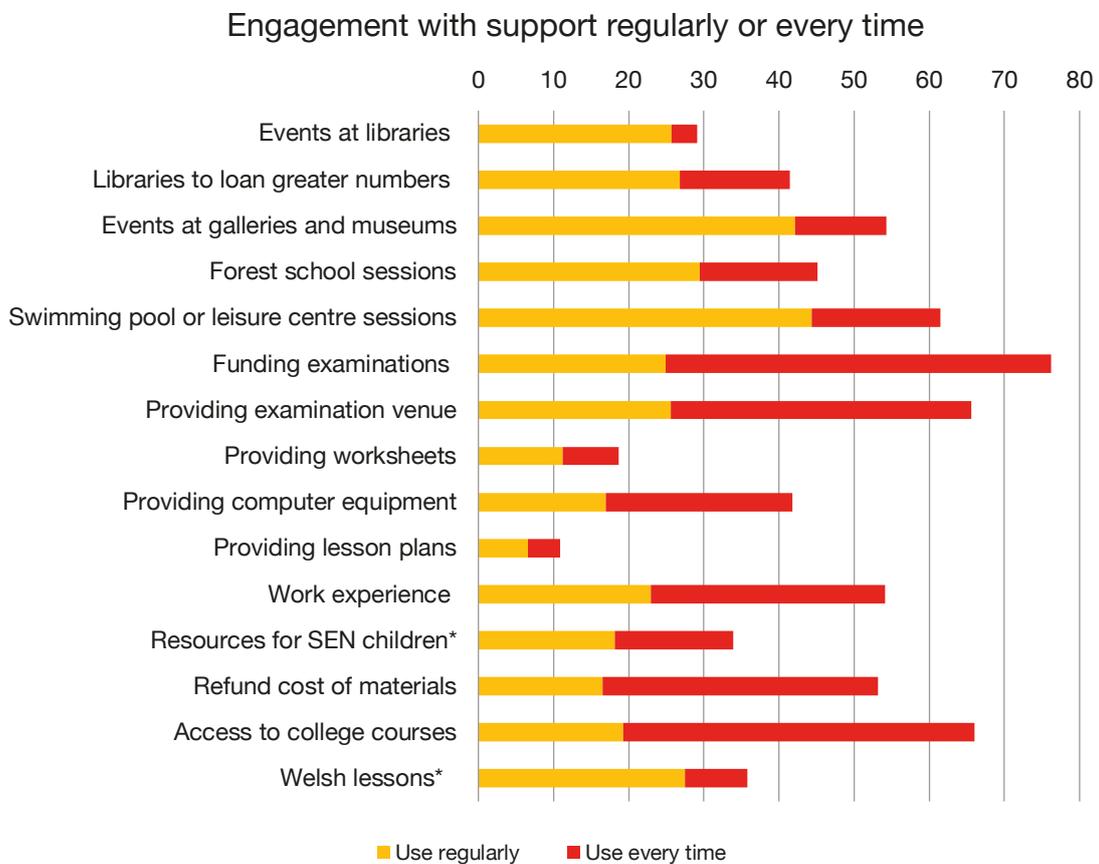


Fig. 2 Engagement with support perceived as adding value by percentage

Note: data marked * relates to percentage of those for whom this is applicable

Where support was perceived by parents as assessment, the majority of parents would not engage with this, or do so only very occasionally. In respect of arrangements for the child to meet a local authority officer for assessment purposes, or to express their wishes and feelings the majority of parents would not engage at all, or only very occasionally, this was 99.33% and 97.08% respectively; for assessment of samples of the child's work 98.87% and for assessment of parental reports 97.08% (Fig. 3).

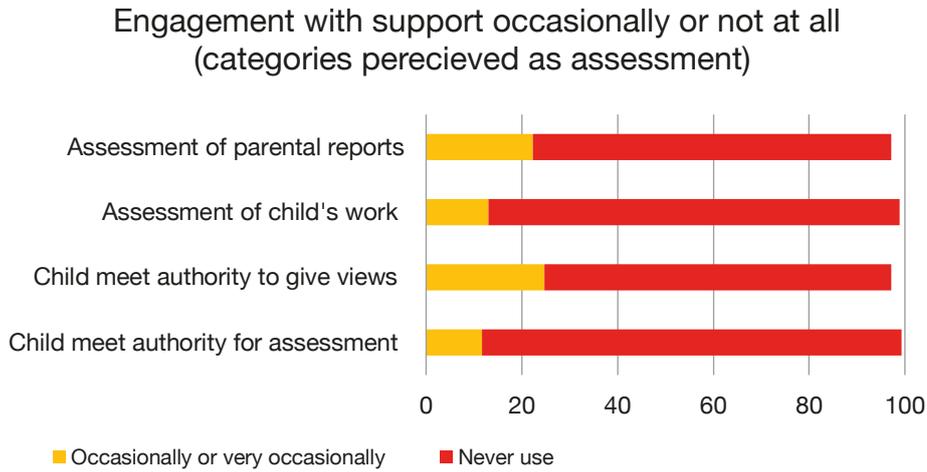


Fig. 3 Engagement with support perceived as assessment never and occasionally by percentage

Specific suggested support

Arranging events such as talks, hands on learning, computer access, or special interest classes at libraries for home educating families.

In some local authority areas education staff work to facilitate access to events at libraries, but this is not found in many authority areas. Respondents in 17.16% of cases stated that they would not engage at all with events such as talks, hands on learning, computer access, or special interest classes at libraries for HE families, were these offered. However, 25.73% would use this support regularly and 3.39% every time, with 53.72% indicating that they would use it occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 4).

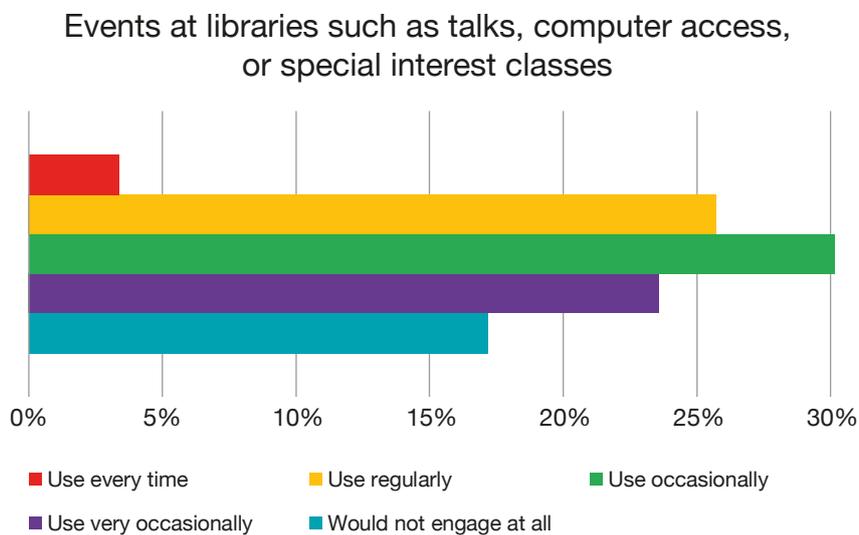


Fig. 4 Engagement with events at libraries by percentage

Arranging for home educated children to borrow greater numbers of books from libraries

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the ability for home educated children to withdraw a greater number of books from libraries is available in a significant minority of local authority areas, although this is far from universal. Respondents to the free text question included 7 individuals who already use this service and value it, these primarily centred around cost saving:

'My kids love to read and I'm on UC, so no way could I buy books if the library wasn't giving us extra.'

'The bus into town with 4 children is not easy, never mind paying for it. We get extra books. I go once a week and can afford to take them swimming as well.'

'I don't know why you asked about extra library books as it costs nothing, so they should do it anyway.'

Respondents indicated that they would not use this support in 17.79% of cases, with 26.80% stating that they would use it regularly and 14.64% that they would use it always. The remaining 40.76% of respondents indicated that they would use it occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 5).

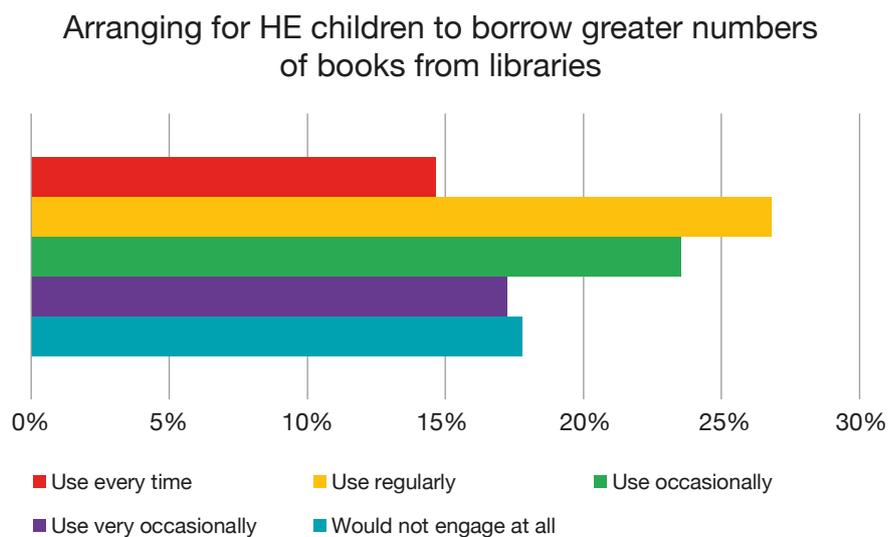


Fig. 5 Engagement with attending libraries to loan greater numbers of books by percentage

Arranging events at museums and galleries for home educating families

Some local authority education staff do arrange access to events for home educating families at no, or low cost. Anecdotal information from those authority areas suggesting that this is popular, is borne out by 42.12% of respondents indicating that they would use this support regularly and 12.16% every time. However, 11.04% of respondents would not use this support at all and 34.68% would use it at occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 6).

Arranging events at galleries and museums for HE families

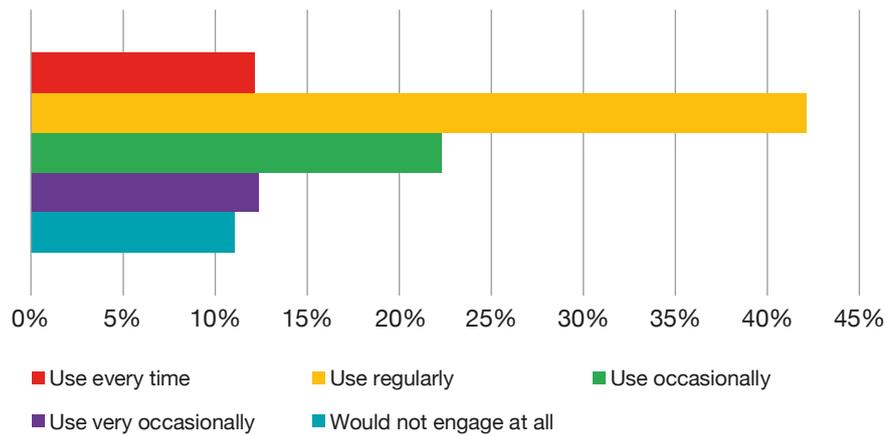


Fig. 6 Engagement with events at galleries and museums by percentage

Parents responding to the free text question suggested other possible venues for which access arrangements could be made for home educated children, including school science laboratories, theatres, dance and music events. Home educating parents already access these types of provisions in many cases, but those on low income may struggle to fund these enrichment events, consequently disadvantaging their children.

Arranging sessions at forest school for home educated children

Forest school is a popular choice amongst home educating families as it provides outdoor exercise with social opportunity, learning and the raising of environmental awareness. Although 18.43% of parents would not use this support at all, 15.73% would do so every time and 29.44% would use such support regularly. The remaining 35.40% would use this support very occasionally or occasionally (Fig. 7).

Arranging forest school sessions for HE families

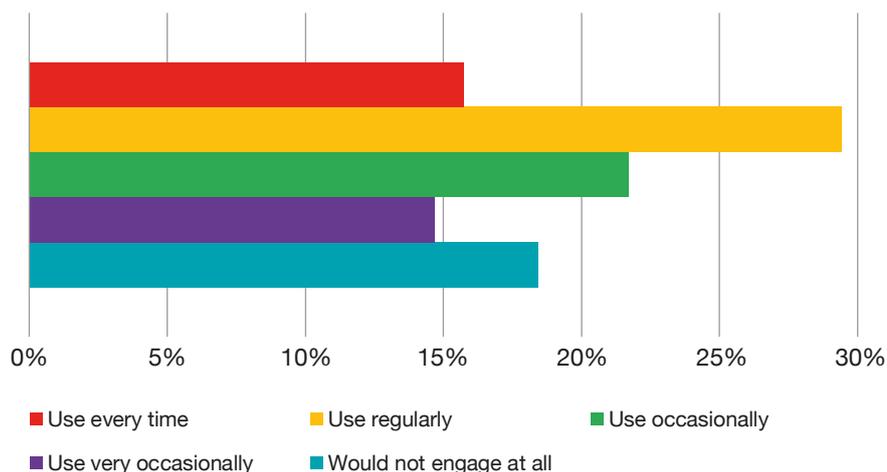


Fig. 7 Engagement with forest school by percentage

Arranging sessions at leisure centres and swimming pools for home educated children

During the Covid 19 lockdown, the Welsh Assembly Government made funding available for local authorities to support home educating families. Authority staff were able to decide how to allocate the funding and this included provision of vouchers for access to swimming and leisure centres (once open). Anecdotal evidence indicates that

this was a popular support offer and this is borne out by 17.12% of respondents indicating that they would use this support every time and 44.37% regularly. Although 13.06% would not engage with this offer, 25.45% of parents would use this support occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig.8).

Arranging swimming and leisure centre sessions for HE families

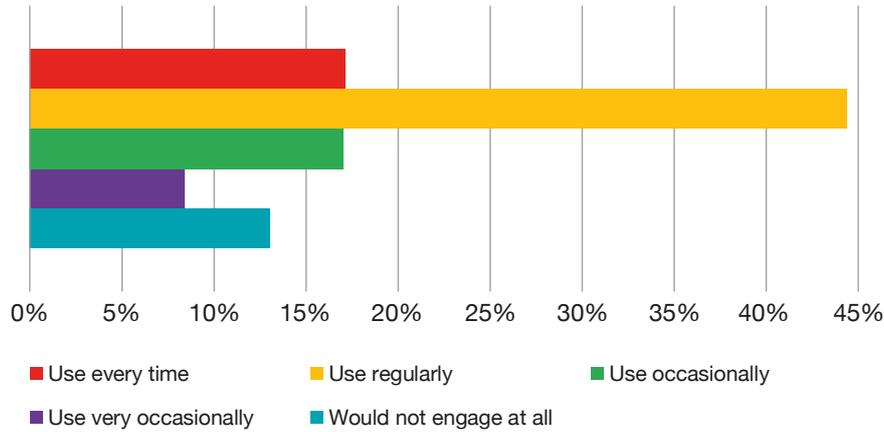


Fig. 8 Arranging swimming pool, or leisure centre sessions by percentage

Funding examination fees for home educated children

Anecdotal evidence strongly indicates that a common complaint from home educating families is that examinations are difficult to access and expensive. These difficulties were exacerbated during the Covid 19 lockdown with home educated young people losing the opportunity to sit examinations and receive grades.

There appears to be a level of dismay that examination fees are not publicly funded and venues not provided for home educated young people. This anecdotal evidence is supported by 51.24% of parents indicating that they would use this facility every time and 24.94% regularly. A modest 7.19% would not use this support at all and these respondents are primarily those who indicated lack of trust in local authorities. The remaining 16.62% would use this facility occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig.9).

Funding examination fees for HE children

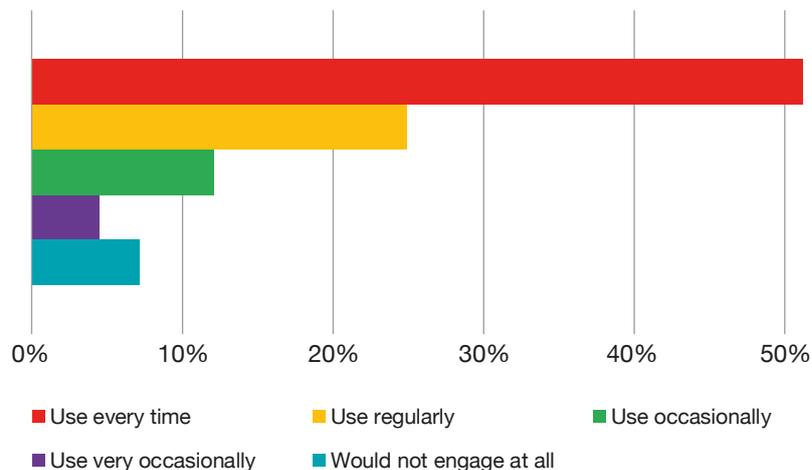


Fig. 9 Engagement with funding of examination fees by percentage

Parents were also concerned about access to appropriate course materials for examinations and expressed a need for support with locating and booking examination centres, together with access to assessment of practical parts of examinations:

'Parents need assistance from LA in navigating correct course material for relevant exams, help booking exam centres and fees. Sorting GCSE's is a minefield and difficult to sieve through.'

'I'd like them to fund practical endorsements for A level sciences taken from home education.'

'(My child) was in tears last year because his exams were cancelled literally last minute.'

'I rang loads of places getting further and further from home just to try to find an exam centre. We gave up.'

'My son managed to sit his GCSE, but we had to drive over 100 miles away for him to do so.'

Access to examination venues would be used by 40.00% of parents every time and 25.62% regularly. The support would be used occasionally, or very occasionally by 24.27% of parents and a modest 10.11% would not use the support at all (Fig. 10).

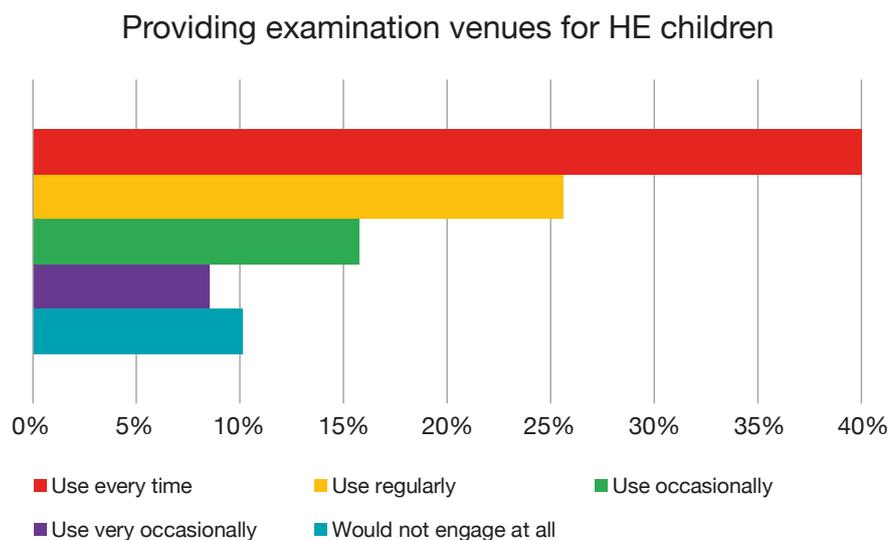


Fig. 10 Engagement with provision of examination venues by percentage

Providing worksheets and workbooks for home educated children

There has been a recent rise in websites providing free learning materials to home educating families. However, it should be borne in mind that many parents who use a child led approach do not use this type of resource and that this may have influenced the response to this question, with 47.87% of respondents stating that they would not use this support at all and only 7.42% would engage every time. The support would be used regularly by 11.24% of parents and at least very occasionally by 33.49% (Fig. 11).

Providing worksheets and workbooks for HE children

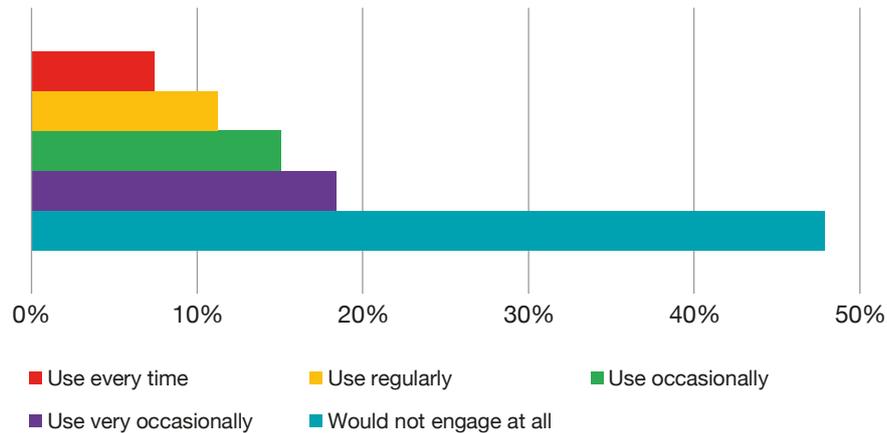


Fig. 11 Engagement with provision of worksheets by percentage

Providing computer equipment for home educated children

The split in response to the provision of computer equipment was marked, with 24.83% stating that they would use it every time, a further 16.93% that they would engage regularly and 32.96% that they would not engage at all. This may reflect economic status, investigation of which is beyond the scope of this research:

'As an extremely low-income household we would have really benefited from the free computers in lockdown. Unfortunately, we weren't eligible.'

The remaining 25.29% of respondents would engage occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 12).

Providing computing equipment for HE children

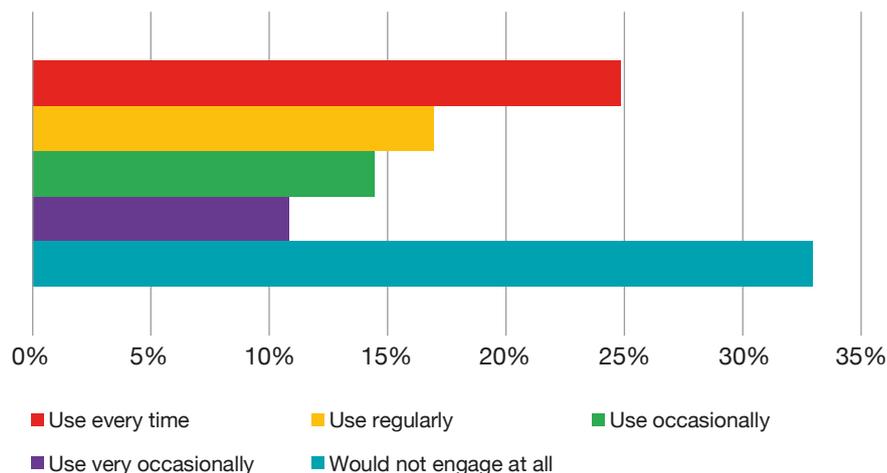


Fig. 12 Engagement with provision of computer equipment by percentage

Providing access to lesson plans for home educated children

Lesson plans are readily available to most families through Government sponsored (or provided) online resources. In addition, many home educating families follow learning methods which do not include formal lessons. These factors may explain why very few

respondents welcomed engagement with this support with only 4.30% stating that they would engage every time and 6.56% regularly. Occasional, or very occasional engagement would be welcomed by 30.31% of respondents and the majority, 58.82% would not engage at all (Fig. 13).

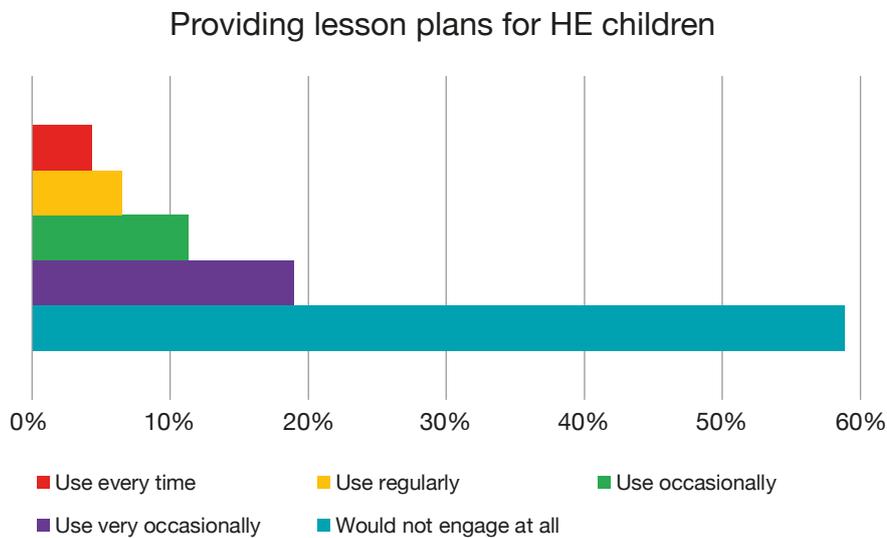


Fig. 13 Engagement with provision of lesson plans by percentage

Providing opportunity for the child to meet a local authority officer in order for them to assess the home education provision or express their views

No respondents indicated that they would engage with meetings between the child and a local authority officer to assess the child's work every time and only 0.67% that they would do so regularly. The significant majority of respondents (87.64%) would not engage with this support at all and 11.69% that they would do so occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 14).

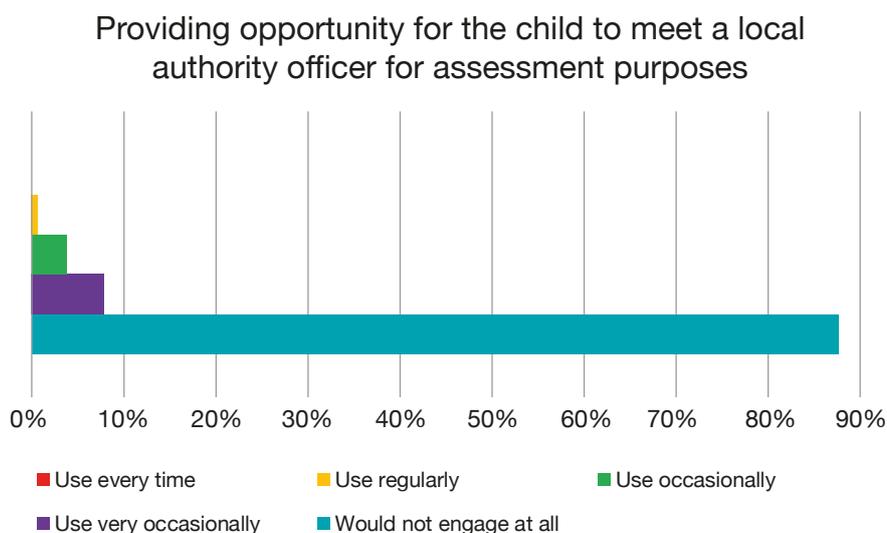


Fig. 14 Engagement with opportunity for child to meet a local authority officer for assessment by percentage

A similar response was received to whether parents would engage with provision of opportunity for the child to share their views, wishes and feelings with a local authority officer, with only 0.22% stating that they would engage every time and 2.70% that they would engage regularly. Conversely, 72.36% of parents would not engage at all and 24.72% would engage very occasionally, or occasionally (Fig. 15).

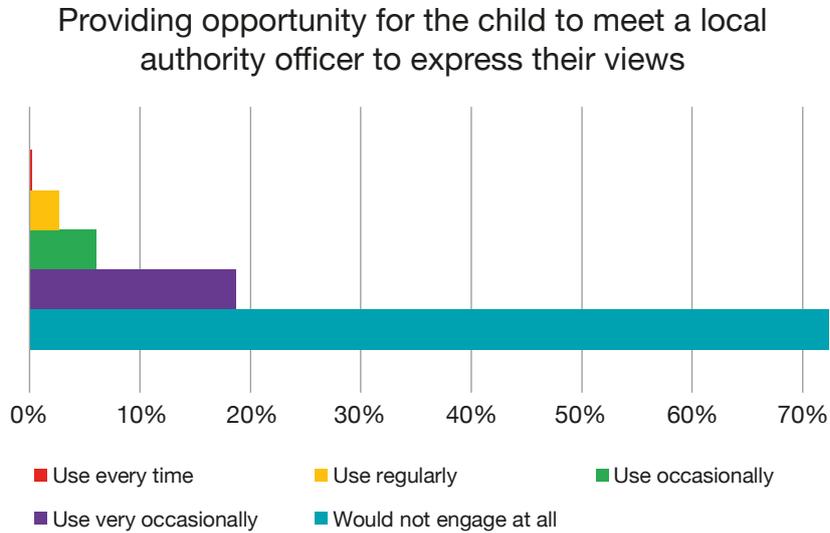


Fig. 15 Engagement by child with meetings with local authority to express views by percentage

Providing assessment of samples of home educated children's work

Only 0.45% of parents indicated that they would engage with provision of assessment of samples of their child's work every time and 0.68% that they would do so regularly. A further 13.06% of respondents would engage with this support occasionally, or very occasionally, with the significant majority stating that they would not engage at all, at 85.81% (Fig. 16).

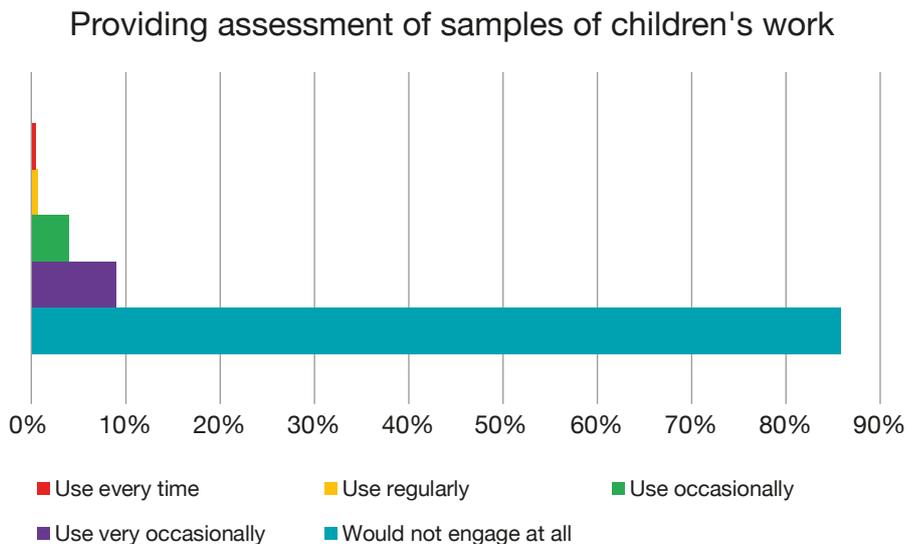


Fig. 16 Engagement with assessment of work samples by percentage.

Provision of assessment of parents' reports on the education provided to home educated children

Respondents indicated that they would engage with assessment of parental reports on the education provision every time in 1.80% of cases and that they would engage regularly in 1.12% of cases. A significant majority of parents (74.83%) would not engage with this support at all and 22.25% would do so occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 17).

Providing assessment of parental reports of children's work

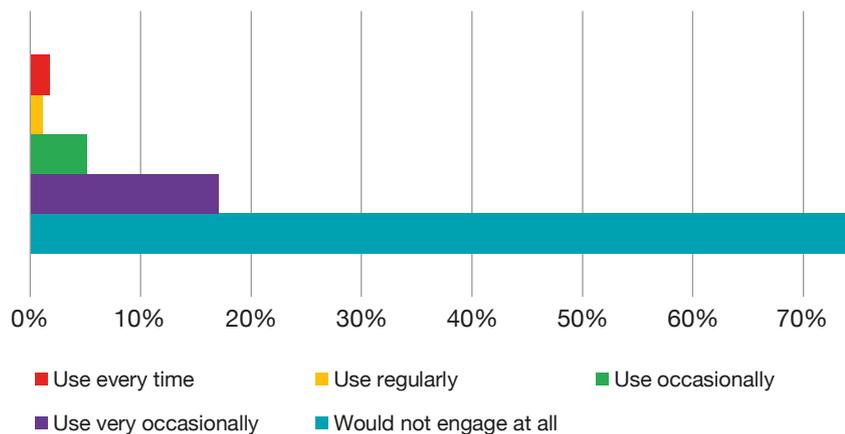


Fig. 17 Engagement with assessment of education reports by percentage

Facilitating work experience for home educated young people

Anecdotal evidence indicates that access to work experience for home educated young people is fraught with difficulty, as providers will at times seek proof of consent from a school, which cannot be provided, or decline the young person on the basis of insurance concerns. Lack of knowledge about home education can also, at times, lead providers to express concerns about the legality of home educated young people taking part. Facilitation of work experience by local authorities could address these concerns.

This question would not be applicable to parents of young children. Respondents in 89.01% of cases indicated that provision of work experience for home educated young people was applicable to them. Parents would engage with this support every time in 31.19% of cases and regularly in 22.94% of cases. This support would not be engaged with by 13.76% of respondents and 22.01% would engage occasionally, or very occasionally (Fig. 18).

Provision of resources such as speech and language therapy to SEN home educated young people

Respondents indicated that provision of resources for special needs children would be relevant to them in 61.11% of cases. Of those for whom this is relevant, 36.36% of respondents would not engage with this provision and 19.71% would do so only occasionally, or very occasionally. Respondents would always engage with this provision in 25.76% of cases and regularly in 18.18% of cases (Fig. 19).

Facilitating access to work experience for older children

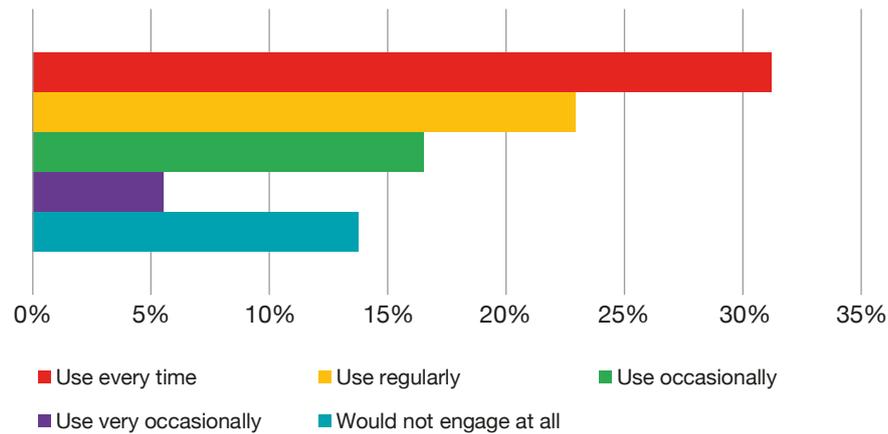


Fig. 18 Engagement with access to work experience by percentage

Provision of resources such as speech and language therapy for children with special needs

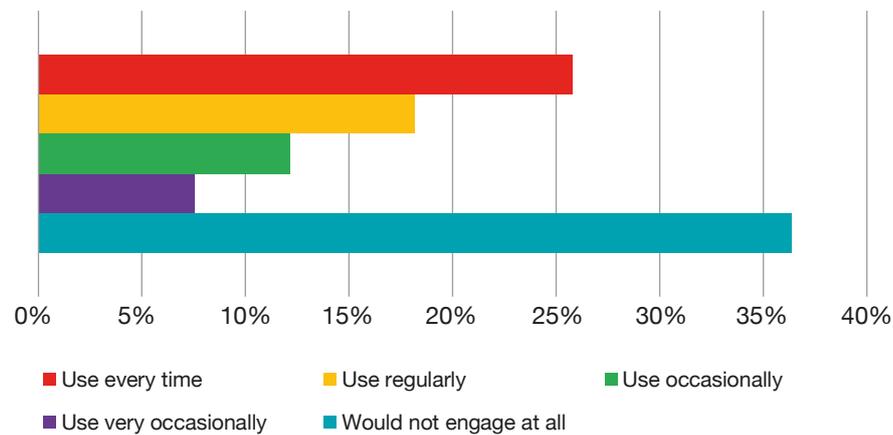


Fig. 19 Engagement with provision of SEN resources by percentage

Respondents to the free text response question (other, please specify) highlighted this need for support in often heartfelt comments:

'My child's braille reader was taken away as soon as we started to home educate.'

'My SEN child could not cope in school, but nobody offers any support to us now that we home educate.'

'I'm expected to fund all of (my son's) therapy which the school used to get paid to fund and still didn't provide. I had to home educate him to save him from a hellish system and now I get penalised.'

'Home education was a no choice decision for me because she got no support in school. She fell between the cracks of not coping but not getting an EHCP.'

It is clear from responses to this question that lack of good quality provision in schools, for special needs children, is a prompt for decisions to home educate in many cases, which may lead to resentment where support is withdrawn, or refused. Efforts could be directed at improving the quality of school-based provision, whilst ensuring that support is available to those parents who choose to home educate SEN children.

Provision of opportunity to obtain refund of the cost of home education materials

Respondents who stated that they would not engage with this support (22.02%) were primarily those respondents who expressed lack of trust in the local authority and concerns about 'strings' being attached to this provision. Respondents would engage with this support every time in 36.70% of cases and regularly in 16.51% of cases. Respondents would engage with this support very occasionally, or occasionally in 24.76% of cases (Fig. 20).

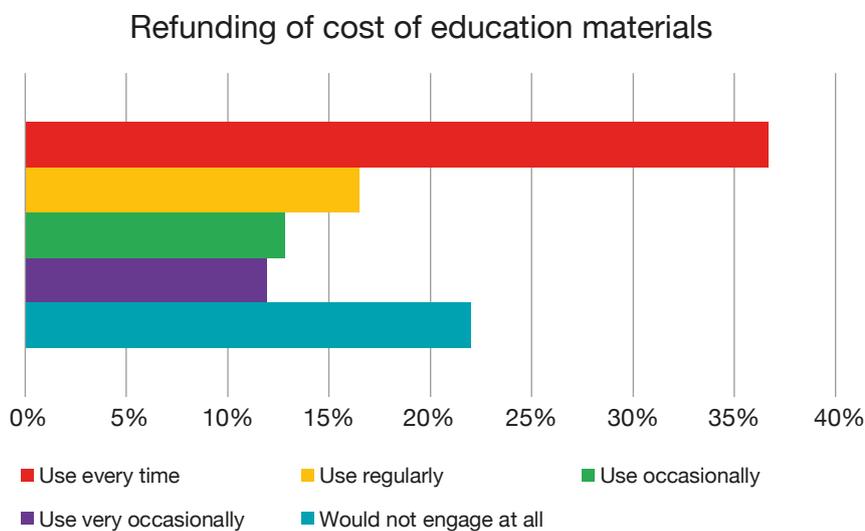


Fig. 20 Engagement with refund of cost of home education materials by percentage

Providing access to college courses for home educated young people

Access to college courses for 14 -16 year old, home educated young people is available in most authority area in England but is not available in Wales. This provision is not consistent and is often limited to a narrow range of subject availability. Engagement with this support was applicable (or might be in the future) to 89.01% of respondents, with 46.79% stating that they would engage with this support every time and 19.27% regularly. Engagement would take place at least very occasionally or occasionally for 14.67% of respondents and 9.17% would not engage at all (Fig. 21).

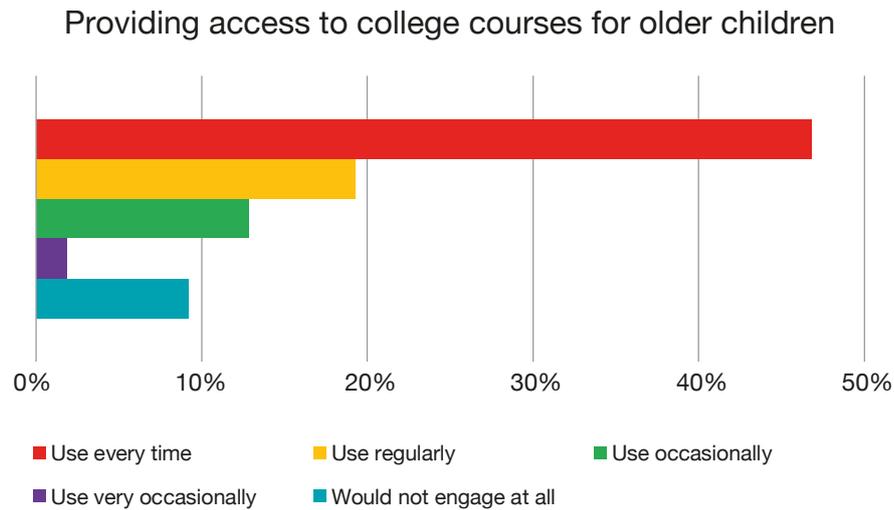


Fig. 21 Engagement with access to college courses by percentage

Provision of Welsh language classes

Provision of Welsh language classes is only applicable to respondents from Wales of whom 38.53% would not engage with this support at all. This figure must be considered in light of respondent comments to this question, which indicated in several cases that this was because the family was Welsh speaking. Further research may be required, targeted at those families for whom Welsh language is not used in the home:

'We are first language Welsh, so would not use it, but my cousin would love it as her kids struggle to speak their own language.'

Respondents for whom this question is applicable, would engage with this support every time in 8.26% of cases and regularly in 27.52% of cases, with 25.69% of respondents indicating that they would do so very occasionally or occasionally (Fig. 22).

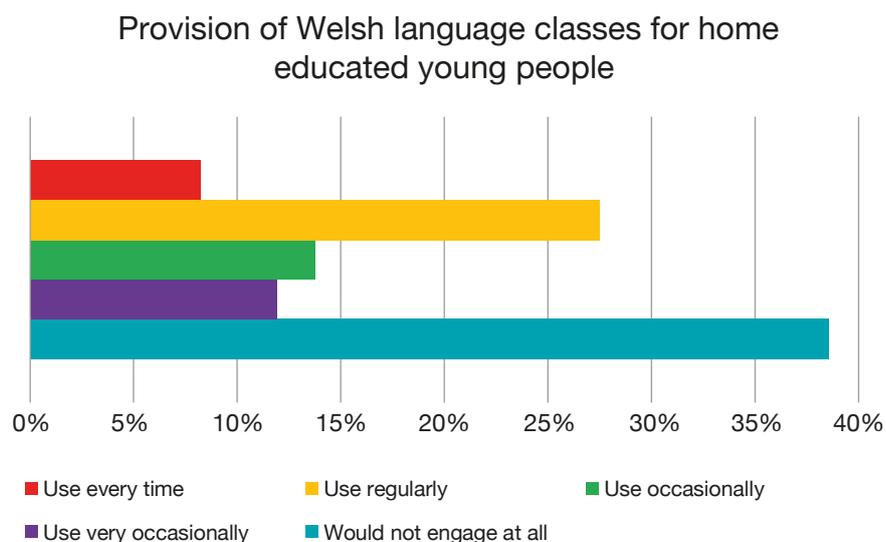


Fig. 22 Engagement with Welsh language classes by percentage

Other suggestions

Other suggestions made by respondents included the provision of a resource library for home educated families and access to low cost, or no cost resources such as textbooks, specialist classes and science equipment:

'I would use access to labs in schools and would really value access to a LGBTQ youth support worker and sex education lessons.'

Respondents also referred to the need for support with access to schemes such as sports clubs and the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme.

Of those respondents providing free text suggestions for support, 13.67% indicated a need for better signposting by local authorities to organisations able to provide support to home educating families.

Limitations

The survey was circulated across several home education support groups and through Education Otherwise membership. Respondents from these groups were self-selecting. This results in those parents who are not members of support groups being excluded from the research and it is impossible to know if their input would change the findings. However, the number of respondents from a mixed range of groups, is believed to be representative of the home educating cohort of families.

Conclusion

Given the clear requirement that trust needs to be built up and developed between local authority staff and home educating families in order to raise engagement, local authorities should be aware of this crucial aspect of the relationship in order to build support which is welcomed by families. Home educating families must also understand that where public funding is made available to individuals, a level of accountability on the part of the public body exists and cannot be ignored.

Home educating families would welcome support which adds value to their home education provision, on the basis that such support does not come with requirements that would alter the nature of that provision, or otherwise undermine different educational approaches.

Respondents to the research were clear that they value support which provides access to facilities and resources, most notably access for older children to examinations and work experience. What was equally clear is that respondents did not consider assessment of children's work, meetings with children, or assessment of education reports to be supportive. Home educating families must accept that public bodies have a duty to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately and that this may involve an element of cost benefit analysis of that resource allocation.

Public bodies do have a part to play in engaging with home educating families in order to fulfil their duties. Where public bodies, or home educating families take an adversarial approach toward each other, experience demonstrates that considerable resources are expended in seeking to ensure engagement, both financial and otherwise. It is in nobody's interests for this situation to continue, making it crucial that future engagement is undertaken in a mutually respectful and supportive manner.

Home educating families were asked to make vocal their needs and in doing so, to take a step toward increased engagement. Many expressed a need to be heard by their local authorities and we know that most public bodies and local authority staff welcome the opportunity to hear and not just to listen.

This research indicates that raising engagement between home educating families and public bodies will be furthered by those public bodies offering genuine support to families based on added value. The primary concern in this approach is to support children's wellbeing and education and mutual trust will enable that to be assured. The overall value exchange in public bodies taking a support-based approach toward home educating families must not be underestimated.

Notes

Thanks again for sending your report on home education support. We found it helpful in the following context.

The Welsh Government is considering how it can work with and support the home education sector across Wales. It is important to learn from activity already occurring and seek the views of those with 'lived experience' as we seek to develop policy and practice in this area; and stakeholder engagement is an important aspect of policy development.

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