



The home education charity
Different and Equal

Home Education Trends: Post Lockdown



Wendy Charles-Warner

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Home Education Trends: Post Lockdown

Following publication of our report 'Home Education: The Covid Effect', on trends in home education, this report examines continuing trends in parental choice to home educate their children and how Covid 19 arrangements have continued to affect those choices.

There is increasing positive narrative around home education with current indications suggesting a shift away from the rhetoric which incorrectly conflates home education with safeguarding risk. When and wherever this baseless attribution is promoted, home educating families continue to express disappointment.

Further, a tide of media reporting is developing around a false negative connotation associated with the number of children who are being home educated. The narrative from ministers, members of both houses and public bodies continues to propound the notion of rising numbers of home educated children as a concern from which to launch promises of mandatory registration, in advance of analysis of the consultation on the issue.

There are tentative signs of recognition that what was an ever-widening divide between home educating families and local authorities is being narrowed by a change in narrative. This is bearing fruit, as shown in the commitment by the Welsh Assembly Government to move away from an adversarial position, with the wide spread success of our local authority 'kit award' supporting this positive development.

Primary stakeholders and decision makers recognise that decision making and legislative changes must be based on a solid foundation of factual research: decisions made based on reliance upon flawed data and unevidenced assertions from whatever source is folly in the extreme. This report brings accurate data to the table in order to inform decision making.



Wendy Charles-Warner, Chair, Education Otherwise

Executive summary

This report examines accurate home education data collated from all 152 local authorities in England. Findings include that:

- Between 7th April and the 1st October 2021 there was a 7.4% fall in numbers of home educated children in England from 78,184 to 72,394.
- Main reasons cited by parents for home educating their child continue to relate to specific educational failure of schools and matters relating to welfare and well-being.
- Divides between home educating families and public bodies continue to be driven by the propagation of false narratives by public bodies.
- Despite data confirming a net decline in the numbers of home educated children, public bodies continue a rhetoric of rising numbers.
- Public bodies continue to conflate safeguarding' concerns with the false narrative of rising numbers of children being home educated.
- Covid 19 continues to be a factor in decisions to home educate.
- Media and public body hyperbole continues 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.
- Home educating families report having lost trust in public bodies and continue to feel a sense of professional 'gaslighting' and institutional confirmation bias.
- Parents seek recognition of home education as a different and equal essential choice for many children.

The background

Nothing has changed in recent years, in terms of the status of home education; it has always been and remains a legal choice for parents in England and Wales. Home education 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’.*

Despite home education being of equal legal status to school education, there are continued suggestions that home educated children are ‘invisible’, or ‘unseen’ and consequently at ‘safeguarding risk.’ Home educating families report having lost trust in public bodies and continue to feel a sense of professional ‘gaslighting’ and institutional confirmation bias.

On the 2nd 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. A short overview¹ published in December 2020 confirmed that the majority of the 5,000 responses were against registration. Despite this clear majority amongst stakeholders, demands for registration continue unabated and are often based on claims of rising numbers²:

‘ADCS is clear that the government must fully fund these duties, especially given the dramatic increase in the size of the elective home education cohort.’

Not only is inaccurate rhetoric around home education being used to fuel demands for registration, but also to drive Governmental moves toward ever-increasing control over home education³:

‘We first consulted on the three things, but, given the responses that we got back and the contentious history that stepping into this space has, we decided to take it in parts and go with the creation of the register, which was the most palatable and we thought would take us at least on the journey, and not look at the monitoring and

¹ 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

² Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) (2021) Elective Home Education Survey 2021. [online] Available at: <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-report-2021>

³ Dixon, K (2021) In ‘Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (2021) Transcript of public hearing in ‘Child Protection in Religious Organisations and Settings’ [Online] Available from: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/investigation/child-protection-religious-organisations-and-settings?tab=hearing>

the content of the education through proposals to legislate...we will see how far that takes us and how well it goes down or how difficult it is, and consider the other two parts of the consultation further into the future.'

Based on a false cyclical argument of rising numbers of home educated children, the invisibility of home educated children and conflating home education and safeguarding, Government and public bodies are demanding registration. Crucially, registration has been publicly promised by the Government prior to the consultation on the matter concluding and continues to be so⁴. These include Baroness Berridge and Robert Halfon⁵ the Chair of the Education Select Committee.

'We remain committed to a registration system for children who are not in school. Further details on a proposed registration system will be in the government response to the Children Not in School consultation, which we intend to publish in due course.'

'What I think needs to happen, first of all there should be a national register.'

These Government undertakings have been given regardless of the views expressed in responses to its various consultations.

This report examines ongoing trends in numbers of home educated children since publication of the Preliminary Report⁶ and Covid Trends report⁷.

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 152 local authorities in England. Each request was followed up in order to obtain a 100%

⁴ Berridge, E (2021) in House of Lords, 'Written Questions, Answers and Statements' 25th May 2021 [Online] Available from: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-05-25/HL560> and 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 Halfon, R (2020) Radio 4 'Today' Programme Transcript available.

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 Charles-Warner, W (2020) 'Home Education Trends: The Covid Effect'. Education Otherwise [Online] available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/category/research/>

response rate and outliers checked for accuracy, This negates the need to determine sample size and nullifies errors associated with extrapolating.

In contrast, data prior to 2019 is taken from high number sampling of in excess of 130 local authorities. Where data is missing in these years for an individual local authority, the number for the nearest available year is substituted. This was regarded as the most reliable way of managing not having complete complement of data.

During late summer and autumn 2021, a survey of 414 parents coming new to home education since 1st January 2021 was undertaken across the same home education groups as surveyed in the preliminary report and the report on the Covid Effect.

Reasons for home education

As in the previous Trends reports, the majority of parents referred to negative reasons relating to school; in their individual cases they took the view that home education would provide a better education and better safeguard their child (specifically in respect of mental health) than school. This was particularly the case in respect of special needs children.

During September, when vaccinations were being rolled out for children, the Education Otherwise helpline and home education support groups experienced a peak in enquiries by parents who were concerned that their children would be vaccinated against the parent's wishes. Some of these concerns centred around coercion of the child and others around the possibility that vaccinations would be made mandatory. Notwithstanding, 90% of over 12 year olds have had their first vaccination and 80% have had a second dose, with booster roll out currently operating⁸. These concerns have continued to be given as the reason for deciding to home educate in a very small and diminishing number of cases.

How many home educated children are there?

The trend is that public bodies develop and present messages based on data provided by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)⁹; ADCS data continues to be routinely inaccurate. Typically, the 2021 ADCS survey gives a 7% rise in numbers of home educated children from October 2020 to October 2021. This figure

⁸ BBC News (2021) 'Covid vaccine: How many people are vaccinated in the UK?' 5th December 2021 [Online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55274833>

⁹ Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) (2021) Elective Home Education Survey 2021. [online] Available at: <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-report-2021>

not only fails to incorporate the periodic changes due to Government policy decisions during that period, but also underestimates the overall October 2021 rise of 11.74% (78,184). This inaccuracy is founded upon the 2020¹⁰ and 2021 ADCS overestimations of the number of home educated children of 75,668 and 81,196; the actual figures being 69,971 and 78,184 respectively.

Numbers of home educated children naturally fluctuated throughout the years, as children move into and out of school for a variety of reasons and at a variety of stages. Statistically it is therefore misleading and simply inaccurate to simply state that from 2020 to 2021 the number of home educated children has increased by 34%¹¹. The facts show this figure to be an exaggeration and lacks proper qualification.

In 'The Covid Effect' we saw numbers of home educated children reach a plateau with a forecast that numbers would drop as the vaccine programme rolled out and parents gained confidence in their children's safety in school. The latest data confirms this.

Using data from all 152 local authorities in England obtained via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, the total for home educated children at the 7th January 2021 was 82,169, a rise from 1st October 2020 (69,791) of 17.73%. On 12th April 2021 the total number was 83,974, a rise of 2.2% from 7th January 2021 and at the 1st October 2021 the number was 78,184, a fall from the 12th April 2021 of 6.89% (Fig:1).

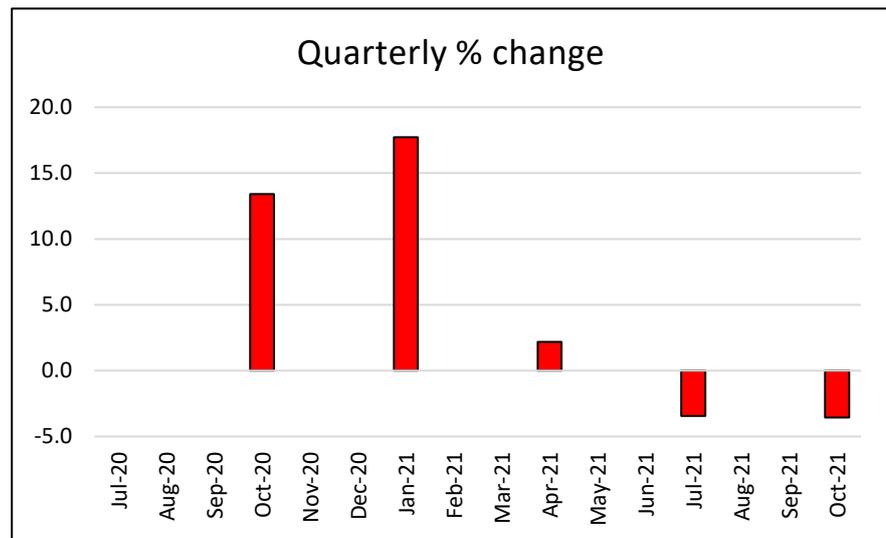


Fig. 1: Quarterly % change in numbers of home educated children in England

¹⁰ Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) (2020) Elective Home Education Survey 2020. Available at: https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_EHE_Survey_2020_FINALweb.pdf.

¹¹ See for example: Booth, S (2021) 'Home education rises 34%, with Covid most likely to be the reason'.

Schoolsweek. [Online] Available from: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/home-education-rises-34-with-covid-most-likely-to-be-the-reason/>

and Weale, S (2021) 'Councils in England report 34% rise in elective home education.' Guardian. [Online]

Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/nov/24/councils-england-report-34-rise-elective-home-education-children>

Trends in numbers reported in the series indicate that previous rises coincided with significant dates on the Covid 19 timeline¹², including announcements by the Prime Minister (PM) that schools would reopen on 1st June 2020 and a second lockdown on the 31st October 2020. Enquiries to home education groups and the Education Otherwise helpline peaked in the first few days of January 2021, following the PM’s announcement that children should return to school.

Whilst numbers rose during this period, they had plateaued by April 2021¹³, with 47 (31%) local authorities reporting reductions in numbers during that period. As forecast in ‘Trends’, those numbers had dropped significantly by October 2021 to 78,184, with 123 of the 152 local authorities reporting falls in numbers

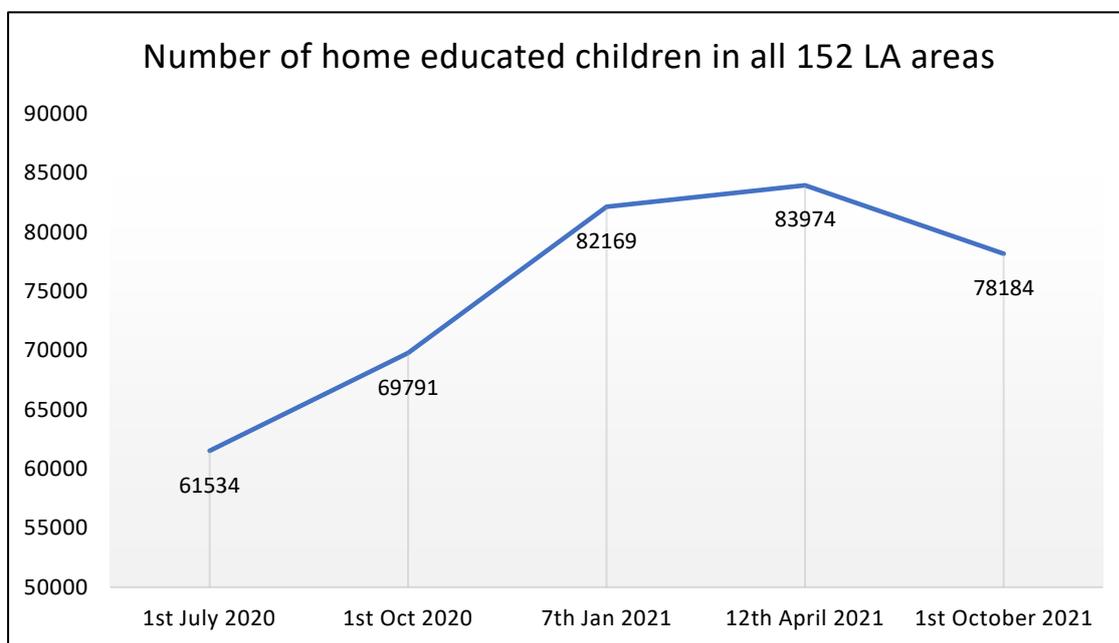


Fig.2: Number of home educated children in all 152 local authority areas.

Trends in reducing numbers of home educated children during 2021 appear to have followed the Covid 19 vaccination programme rollout, which commenced on the 8th December 2020. Numbers started to plateau after January 2021, by which time those aged 70 and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals were receiving vaccination. By September 2021, all adults in the UK had been offered vaccinations and the programme for children’s vaccinations was moving forward. This research does not address the correlation between rising numbers of vaccinated individuals and children returning to school from home education in depth. However, parents

¹² 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>

¹³ Charles-Warner, W (2020) ‘Home Education Trends: The Covid Effect’. Education Otherwise [Online] available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/category/research/>

taking part in the earlier Trends surveys included significant numbers who indicated home education to be a temporary choice until they felt that it was safe for their child to return to school. This indicates that Government decisions relating to Covid have driven not only the rise in figures during 2020, but also the fall in figures during 2021.

The Trends series of reports found that during lockdown, significant numbers of parents responding to surveys stated that their children thrived at home and were happier. The forced ability to experiment with education at home during lockdown learning, gave those parents an insight into the adverse effects that school can have on some children, effects which have returned as children have returned to school. Clearly, whilst many children thrive in schools, home education can provide a more nurturing and supportive environment for these children, which can act to reduce mental health concerns for them and their families.

It is clear that the pandemic has had an effect on numbers of home educated children. Notwithstanding data inaccuracy, the ADCS report highlights this finding and confirms that aspect of the Trends series:

'The pandemic has had a significant impact on the number of children and young people (who) are currently electively home educated... LAs reported anxiety and mental health needs of children and young people as an increasingly common factor in parental decisions to electively home educate.'

Findings in the Trends series that concerns about children's anxiety and mental health make a significant contribution to parental decisions to home educate, are further borne out by recent findings from Parentkind¹⁴:

'Parents' concerns about children's mental health had reduced during lockdown and school closures but have returned to pre-pandemic levels. There a significant rise in parents reporting the incidence of mental health and well-being issues in 2021. Parents are concerned about a range of mental health and wellbeing-related issues. The top five concerns for parents are: Exam stress (55%) Anxiety (54%) Homework-related stress (49%) Bullying (49%) The pressure to constantly engage with social media (48%).'

¹⁴ Parentkind (2021) 'Parent Voice Report 2021' [Online] Available from: https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Annual-Parent-Surveys/Parent-Voice-Report-2021?utm_source=annual+parent+surveys+page&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=Parent+Voice+Report+2021

Concerns about children's mental health constitute one of the primary reasons for a parent deciding to home educate, together with other negative perceptions of school-based provision, but this is not the full story as the Trends series reported: a significant sector of those coming new to home education during lockdown stated an intention that this would be a temporary decision. The fall in numbers of home educated children since April 2021 confirms the likelihood of this being a dominant factor.

Other aspects of Government policy may have also influenced numbers of home educating families, including the introduction of a requirement on schools circulated by letter entitled: '*Elective Home Education (EHE): Your duties, our expectations*¹⁵':

'We expect schools and other professionals to engage with LAs where a parent is considering withdrawing their child from school for EHE before the child's name is removed from the roll. This will enable the LA to coordinate a meeting ahead of the child being withdrawn from school and the parent confirming in writing that they are being electively home educated instead.'

This document did not impose a duty on the parent to attend such a meeting, but many parents report having felt compelled to do so. In addition, home educating families report that significant numbers of schools have responded to this letter as an instruction to decline to remove children from their rolls until such a meeting takes place. Clearly, where a school seeks to dissuade a parent from home educating their child and that parent is not committed to doing so, this can lend itself to those parents withdrawing their notice to remove the child from the school roll. In addition, where a parent has made the choice to home educate the child reluctantly, as a result of perceived failings in the school, a meeting could provide opportunity to address those failings. Assessing the degree to which this policy has affected numbers of home educated children is beyond the scope of this report.

Concerns about children's safety at school which are unrelated to covid 19 continue to rise. This was highlighted in the recent report from Parentkind¹⁶, which found children's mental health to improve during lockdown and to decrease following the children's return to school.

These and other concerns feed into parental choices to home educate their children for safeguarding and reasons associated with school education not delivering for their

¹⁵ DfE letter circulated to schools and shared privately with the researcher

¹⁶ Parentkind (2021) 'Parent Voice Report 2021' [Online] Available from:

https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Annual-Parent-Surveys/Parent-Voice-Report-2021?utm_source=annual+parent+surveys+page&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=Parent+Voice+Report+2021

child. These are reasonable concerns which continue to prompt some parents to choose to home educate, when they might not otherwise have done so; some feel that they have no choice.

Conclusions

This report follows on from the previous Trend series. The research finds previous increases in numbers in the latter half of 2021 to be fuelled, at least in part, by Government decision making related to Covid 19 arrangements. These rises plateaued in the first quarter of 2021. However, from April 2021 to October 2021, numbers fell by 6.98%. A significant reversal of the previous trend in rising numbers.

Published data continues to overstate the number of children who are home educated, claiming rises of 34% in the year to October 2021. This inflated figure can be attributed to extrapolation of partial data that is also inaccurate, reliance on earlier inaccurate data and lack of intermediate sampling. It is of note that no other factual research has examined the intermediate stages of rise and subsequent fall in numbers attributable to Government policies related to Covid 19.

This research finds diminishing effect of Covid 19 on the numbers of home educated children and confirms the signs noted in the earlier Trends report that improved vaccination rates and normalisation of Covid 19 measures are supporting the fall in numbers of home educated children. This fall appears to be supported by recent Government advice to schools to seek a meeting with parents considering home education, prior to the child's removal from the roll. This is a probable source of lowering of numbers coming new to home education; reluctant home educators.

There continues to be a lack of trust in public bodies and the media as they frame the numbers of home educated children in a narrative of concerns, despite compelling evidence to the contrary.

For the majority of children, school remains protective. For the majority of home educated children being educated from home is protective.

This report confirms the findings of the Trend series, that numbers of home educated children would be lower if schools did not suffer from these shortcomings. Parents continue to point out that home education, being different and equal in practice and in legislation, should be treated with respect and not demonised by individuals in positions of responsibility within organisations which are politically and ideologically adverse to home education.