

Exploring moving to home education in secondary schools

This exploratory study investigates the steps that parents, local authorities and schools go through in order to move children to home education from secondary school.

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Introduction

Children should have access to good-quality education so that they can make the most of whatever opportunities life may hold. Children deserve the best education, whether this is full time in school, at home or in other alternative arrangements.

Home education is a valid choice for educating children in an alternative way to school. The Department for Education's (DfE) 'Elective home education – guide for parents' recognises that educating children at home works well when the decision to home-educate has been a positive choice and carried out with a proper regard for the child's needs.¹

It is important that the decision to home-educate is a positive one for all concerned. We are concerned about increasing evidence that home education can be a last resort for some families when relationships have broken down between schools and children or parents.²

This small, exploratory study in the East Midlands investigates moving to home education from secondary school, as opposed to at other times.³ The research pays particular attention to children moving to home education as a means to resolve issues at school.

In our inspections, research and analysis, our aim is to support the interests of children and learners first and foremost. For many parents and children, home education may be the preferred method of education. In highlighting moving to home education where it was not, we aim to better support the interests of children.

Purpose of the research

The number of children educated at home is increasing rapidly. As at autumn 2018, there were an estimated 58,000 children known to be educated at home, which is an

¹ 'Elective home education – guide for parents', Department for Education, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education.

² 'Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school', Ofsted, 2019, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-hidden-children-the-challenges-of-safeguarding-children-who-are-not-attending-school; 'Skipping school: invisible children', Children's Commissioner, 2019; www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/skipping-school-invisible-children.

³ Children are educated at home for various reasons. They can move to home education from school at any age. Some children may have never attended school. See 'Local authorities and home education', Ofsted, 2010; <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141107063050/http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/local-authorities-and-home-education>.

increase of approximately 27% from the previous year.^{4,5} In particular, many children moved to home education from secondary school.⁶

More children with additional needs are now being educated at home.⁷ Growing evidence suggests that, overall, a disproportionate number of children who are removed from the school roll of a secondary school and do not move to another setting⁸ have special educational needs, are from disadvantaged backgrounds or are known to social care services, or have a combination of these characteristics.⁹

Research into home education has been limited. The small amount of research that has been done has usually explored the reasons why parents move their child to home education, the content of teaching or children's outcomes. There is little research that focuses solely on those children who are moving from secondary school to home education. There are even fewer studies on the steps that parents, local authorities (LAs) and schools go through in order to move children to home education.

Ofsted has, for some time, had concerns about off-rolling.¹⁰ We have identified and investigated examples of off-rolling during our inspections. Evidence from inspections suggests that there are occasions when some schools coerce parents to remove a child from the school to be educated at home. In these circumstances, the move to home education is not, and cannot be described as, truly 'elective'. We believe that

⁴ The ADCS surveyed local authorities for their data on numbers of children educated at home. In most circumstances, parents are under no legal obligation to inform the local authority that a child is being home educated. Children who never attend school and are unknown to the local authority will therefore not be included in these estimates.

⁵ 'Elective home education survey', Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), 2018; <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2018>.

⁶ According to the ADCS, children home schooled in the key stage 4 age group saw the greatest increase from 2017 (32%) and the largest group of pupils who are home educated is key stage 3 (12,063) (ADCS, 2018).

⁷ 'Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-hidden-children-the-challenges-of-safeguarding-children-who-are-not-attending-school.

⁸ There are many reasons pupils leave school. They might move to a different area or a different school or move to another country.

⁹ See data on these cohorts as outlined in: 'Timpson review of school exclusion', Department for Education, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/consultations/school-exclusions-review-call-for-evidence, 'Exploring the issue of off-rolling', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/off-rolling-exploring-the-issue, and 'Elective home education survey', ADCS, 2018; <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2018>.

¹⁰ Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. See: 'Ofsted blog: What is off-rolling, and how does Ofsted look at it on inspection?', Ofsted, 2019; <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2019/05/10/what-is-off-rolling-and-how-does-ofsted-look-at-it-on-inspection>.

off-rolling is always wrong. We are committed to reporting when we find off-rolling in schools.

The purpose of this research was therefore to understand more fully how moves to home education are made rather than about home education in general.

Context

We want to thank everyone who took part, particularly those parents and children who came forward, to help us understand how families move to home education from secondary schools.

Because Ofsted has no remit to inspect home education, the research did not seek to establish the content or quality of what is being taught by home-educators. We have not sought to make a judgement about individual cases nor was our research related to recent government consultations about a register for children who are home-educated.

Despite this, however, parents and schools were sometimes cautious about taking part. Some parents were concerned about the introduction of a register for children who are home-educated. A few parents were anxious about the involvement of LAs or worried that our research could lead to Ofsted regulating home education.

We believe that the challenges we faced in carrying out this research highlight barriers to implementing any potential changes to legislation. Given the difficulties we had in encouraging parents to participate in research, and the concerns that some have about state intervention in home education, there may be difficulties in engaging parents in legislative change that they support.

It is important that changes to legislation can improve the lives of children moving to home education. To do so effectively, an understanding of the views and fears of home-educating parents is needed.

Main findings

Children with complex needs moved to home education

- Home education can simply be a parent's preferred way of educating their child. However, in our research in secondary schools, special educational needs and/or medical, behavioural or other well-being needs were the main reasons for moves to home education, according to children and parents.
- It was clear that children in this research had all moved due to difficulties they had experienced in school, although the perspectives of those difficulties generally differed.
- School leaders reported using various strategies to support children who were having difficulties at school, although limited access to in-school and wider support services has made it more difficult for schools to provide appropriate support for some children.

No clear steps for parents, LAs and schools to work together when parents are considering home-education

- The length of time for considering home education was sometimes very short. The period between a parent finding out about the possibility of home education and their child leaving school can be as little as one day.
- Schools and LAs were rarely informed about children moving to home education before they were removed from school.
- Without dialogue before a child moves to home education, schools and LAs have no opportunity to listen to and consider what children think about their move.

Relationship breakdowns between schools, parents and children

- There had been a breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents in all the cases in our research.
- Overall, parents and schools in our research had different understandings of what was best for children. Sometimes, children are left in the middle.
- Parents and even some schools viewed home education as the only option for some children.

Moving to home education to resolve pressures at school

- Parents can move children to home education to avoid pressures at school, for example to avoid prosecution for non-attendance, and permanent exclusions. However, exactly how these pressures act as triggers for moving to home education is complex; at worst it may include gaming from schools or neglectful parenting.
- Evidence that children can be 'off-rolled' into home education included letters from parents asking to move a child to home education that were prepared by a

school. However, school leaders in our research were clear that they would not pressurise parents into moving to home education.

- A child can also be off-rolled by a school applying indirect pressure to coerce parents to move their child to home education. In a minority of cases, parents believed a lack of school support was deliberately designed to let children leave.

Some parents and children left unprepared for moving to home education

- Home education is a huge undertaking for parents. Concerningly, a minority of parents moved their child to home education despite knowing they could not provide an education or in the mistaken belief that the LA would provide education.
- Parents said they would have benefited from information on the financial cost, how to access colleges and exams, and the time and effort home education requires.
- Neither schools, LAs nor parents are required to ensure that children are prepared for home education. Indeed, there was no clear evidence in our study about how schools, LAs and parents were preparing children for home education. Some parents told us that schools had refused to give them their child's previous classwork.
- Who should provide support and how are unclear. Some school leaders were concerned that sharing information with parents about home education could be seen as off-rolling.

Recommendations

Recommendations for policy-makers

- The DfE should consider the findings of this report, should it want to change any legislation relevant to home education.
- The DfE should consider the extent to which current legislation and guidance considers children's views during decisions to home-educate.

Recommendations for schools and LAs

- Schools and LAs should develop clear processes for working together once a parent's intention to home-educate is known.
- LAs and schools should be aware that when a school writes a letter to remove a child to home education on behalf of a parent, this may be evidence of off-rolling.
- After a move to home education is made, it would be good practice for schools to provide parents with children's previous classwork.

Ofsted's response

- Our new education inspection framework explores how the school's curriculum is helping disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) to overcome barriers to learning.
- We will carefully evaluate the reasons for pupils leaving when pupil movement is unusually high. Where off-rolling is found, we will continue to report on this clearly and are likely to judge leadership and management as inadequate.
- We will explore an inspection methodology that enables, where appropriate and where pupil movement into home education is very high, inspectors to take the views of parents who have moved their children into home education into their inspection evidence.¹¹

¹¹ Ofsted cannot, as a matter of course, contact parents of ex-pupils. This is because the Education and Inspections Act (2006) says that we can only consider the views of 'relevant persons': normally those who are parents of current pupils. However, where an inspector has significant concerns about the numbers of pupils going into elective home education, or there is any evidence of off-rolling, the views of parents of ex-pupils are likely to be relevant.

Methods

This research was commissioned in 2018 by our executive board so that we and the wider sector could improve our understanding of this moving to home education. We carried out a small, exploratory study in the East Midlands.

Our main research question was:

‘How do families move to home education from secondary schools?’

The project explored the complexities that parents, children, LAs and secondary schools face during moves to home education. It did not seek to establish the content or quality of what is being taught by home-educators.

We took a qualitative approach to exploring moving to home education in the East Midlands. Seven of the nine LAs in the East Midlands chose to take part in our research.

All participants were identified as having experience of children moving to home education from secondary schools in the East Midlands. It was important to gain the views of parents in order to triangulate family experience with school and LA practice, during moves to home education.

We initially spoke to those responsible for home education in each LA about current practice and processes around children moving to home education from secondary school. From the data they held, they identified schools and parents according to our specifications (see Annex).

We invited a range of secondary schools to participate in the study. This included a balance of those with higher or lower proportions of children moving to home education. A few schools included in the sample were also identified by the LAs as having good practice around moves to home education. Senior secondary school leaders volunteered to take part and then shared school practice and processes for children moving to home education in a focus group.

We invited all families whose child had recently left a school identified in our sample to take part. We offered a variety of ways for families to take part, so that parents and children had the opportunity to give their views in whichever way they were most comfortable.¹² A small number of parents and children came forward to take part. We developed an anonymous questionnaire and asked LAs to follow up on our

¹² These included face-to-face focus groups or interviews, telephone interviews, a questionnaire, and written responses. To enable children to take part, we offered the options to participate in discussion groups, to take a questionnaire or to respond with a letter or drawing.

invitations with a telephone call.¹³ The questionnaire covered largely the same questions as the interviews.

Four Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), under the guidance of our research team, carried out interviews and focus groups with:¹⁴

- 16 LA representatives for home education
- 36 senior leaders of secondary schools
- 23 parents
- four of their children.

From our questionnaire and other written methods that children were comfortable with, we received responses from:

- eight parents
- three children.

We recorded and transcribed these interviews and focus groups. We prepared the data for analysis through the process of coding using standard qualitative software. Due to the limited literature on the moving process, we developed a coding framework using the knowledge that HMI and researchers gained during the interviews.

We used a thematic-analysis approach. By investigating patterns in the coded data, we identified the themes, outlined in our main points, that give a meaningful representation of the experiences of moving to home education of those we spoke to. Inspection evidence has informed both the purpose of this research and our understanding of the findings.

Limitations

This research is a small, exploratory study in the East Midlands. As such, it is not representative of moving to home education in general.

This study should be viewed as an exploration of the perspectives and themes that we have been able to access.

¹³ LAs subsequently telephoned a select number of families representative of families who have moved to home education from secondary school in their area. Selection was dependent on the LAs' existing contact details and/or working relationships.

¹⁴ The total number of participants from all methods can be found in the annex.

During the course of carrying out the research, there were many different views about what happened during moves to home education. This research is based on self-report methods. We cannot confirm their accuracy.

Children who are home-educated can be from any geographic location, family type or ethnic group. However, we faced difficulties in accessing participants.¹⁵

Ofsted does not hold the details of families who have moved to home education and the schools they have moved from. LAs identified schools and parents for us to speak to. This means that parents unwilling to engage with LAs, and schools not identified by LAs, are missing from our research.¹⁶

This means that there are some family contexts and experiences that are not represented in our research. It is unlikely that the views of parents, children, schools or LAs we spoke to represent everyone with recent experience of moving to home education from secondary school. We cannot know for certain what the range of views and experiences might be because nationally we do not have an accurate picture of how many children are educated at home or why.¹⁷

Those who took part may have particular perspectives about moving to home education that would affect our understanding of the research question.¹⁸

We are not also able to say how common it is for schools to pressurise parents into moving to home education.¹⁹

Finally, seven children took part.

¹⁵ Issues of access to participants and self-selection for research within the home education community have been discussed and recognised in the wider home education literature, such as 'Homeschooling: a comprehensive survey of the research', Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; <https://othereducation.org/index.php/OE/article/view/10>; 'The legacy of home schooling: case studies of late adolescents in transition'. Goymer, 2001; <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.364973>.

¹⁶ LAs had not identified any independent schools as having higher proportions of moves to home education, lower proportions or schools that may have good practice around moves to home education according to the LA. This does not mean that they do not have these characteristics. It could highlight a potential issue with LA data on children who move to home education from independent schools.

¹⁷ Local authorities collect and record the numbers of children who have moved from secondary school to home education and can collect the reasons for that move. However, information on how many children are educated at home or why is not collected centrally or shared.

¹⁸ For example, because of our role as the regulator of schools. Individuals may have been more likely to volunteer to take part in our research if they have experienced difficulties at school.

Ethics and safeguarding

We will publish details of our ethics and safeguarding procedures on our website soon.

Main report, by theme

Children with complex needs moved to home education

1. The reasons why individual children move to home education from secondary schools are extremely complex and multi-faceted. Clearly, parents, schools and LAs are all invested in supporting children while at secondary school.
2. The general perceptions of parents and school leaders differed on whether the needs of children were met in schools. We cannot say from our evidence whether these children's needs were met or not met by schools or how well schools were providing for all children's needs. However, what is clear is that children who moved to home education in our research often had complex needs.
3. All parents moved their children to home education to better meet their child's special educational needs or medical, behavioural or mental well-being needs. Parents, children and a few LAs identified a lack of flexibility or awareness in schools around these needs as a cause. Parents who home-educated that we spoke to strongly believed that the strategies and approaches that schools had taken when managing their children's needs were ineffective. Parents perceived, for example, a lack of understanding from teachers about their child's learning difficulties or told us that the school had not responded effectively to the families' bullying complaints.
4. The children we managed to speak to similarly commented that schools had not met their needs. The children we spoke to told us about relationships with teachers being difficult, being bullied in school or a lack of school support. They explained:

'children (with SEND) get less attention and get told off'

the school was 'excluding me for silly reasons'

or

the school 'didn't understand that children (with SEND) sometimes can't sit still.'
5. Some LA representatives also confirmed that some parents do move to home education because schools are unable meet children's needs. Although from the LA's view, this could be either a parent's perception or an actual issue.

6. In contrast, school leaders told us that, rather than schools not meeting children's needs, some parents home-educate because they struggle to support school policies, for example around attendance and behaviour. Ofsted's recent commentary on managing behaviour in schools highlights how crucial it is for parents to work with the school to support its behaviour policy.²⁰
7. In addition, we know from inspection that some schools are excellent at providing even for the most complex of children's needs. School leaders who took part in our research reported using various strategies to support children who were having difficulties at school. The support that schools said they provided included:
 - one-to-one adult support for children
 - counselling
 - timetable alterations
 - child-reintegration programmes
 - vocational courses
 - intervention from external agencies, such as clinical or educational psychologists
 - using alternative provision
 - managed moves
 - support for substance abuse.
8. Some school leaders also questioned whether the child's needs would be met by moving to home education. They expressed concern that when some children return to school from home education, they are further behind than when they left.
9. It was clear that children in this research had all moved due to difficulties experienced in school, although the perspectives of what those difficulties generally were differed.

²⁰ 'HMCI commentary: managing behaviour research', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/research-commentary-managing-behaviour.

10. Some LAs suggested that the reasons children move to home education from secondary school are different to those when children might move at primary school.²¹ As one LA explained:

‘Primary is a lot more around a choice, you know, a lifestyle choice. But in secondary, I think by then if it was going to be a choice they’d have already gone...’

11. Home education can be a parent’s preferred way of educating their child. However, in our research into moving to home education in secondary schools, parents and children identified children’s complex needs not being met as a main reason for their move to home education.

Limited access to in-school and wider services has made it more difficult to provide appropriate support for some children.

12. Schools clearly face some important barriers to providing for the most complex of children’s needs. Much of the support that helped schools to meet pupils’ needs is no longer available.
13. School leaders and some LA in our research discussed budget cuts that reduced the funding of pastoral care and learning mentors. Some stated that youth services, alternative provision and pupil referral units are often full, expensive or of low quality. One LA representative said:

‘One of our secondary schools almost apologised for the fact that a child was becoming home educated. They said that they would have previously supported this child, but no longer have that provision available.’

14. Access to external services that support parents, such as early help, school refusal support and mental well-being services, had also limited the support available for some children. As one school leader commented:

‘The effects on external agency support for both schools and families has created a crisis, and the increase in home education is one of the results of that.’

²¹ Although children moving to home education from secondary school may have distinct reasons for moving to home education, that does not mean that children who move to home education from primary school will not have done so for similar reasons.

No clear steps for considering whether to home-educate

The length of time between a parent finding out about home education and a child leaving school can be as little as a day.

15. Under the current guidance,²² parents are only advised that it is 'sensible' to inform their school and LA that their child is 'being withdrawn for home education'.²³ In our research, we saw that the steps schools, LA and parents went through to officially remove children from school rolls were clear. Withdrawing a child from a school roll to move to home education is a quick and easy process.
16. Often, parents simply wrote a letter to the school to move their child to home education.
17. However, outside the process of removing children from the school roll, there are few clear steps when children move to home education. Most parents, schools and LAs were unable to describe clear steps for considering home-education. Individual school leaders or LA representatives were concerned that parents could make 'knee-jerk' decisions.
18. The length of time for considering home education was sometimes very short. But in general, the time it took to move a child to home education varied greatly in our research. In extreme circumstances, moving a child to home education took as little as a day. For example, after one parent heard about the possibility of home education, their child said:

'Mum took me out of school the next day.'
19. One parent said that their child had not had the opportunity to say goodbye to their friends.
20. What is concerning to Ofsted is the speed and lack of clear steps to support a decision that could greatly affect a child's life.

There were no clear steps for parents, LA and schools to work together.

21. When moving takes longer, there is more opportunity for schools and LAs to work with parents and children. When LAs were able to support parents to consider a move to home education, their role included ensuring that parents fully understand the responsibilities they are taking on. LAs talk to parents to

²² 'Elective home education: guidance for parents', Department for Education, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education.

²³ The only exceptions to this are (a) that a child may not be removed from the roll of a special school without the consent of the LA if enrolled there under arrangements made by the LA.

understand their situation. Some provide guidance on their decision and what home education entails.

22. Where their role involved facilitating courses at college or alternative provision, they told children and parents about part-time courses for children in other settings as part of their home education.

‘I have long conversations with the parents, frequent conversations. I don’t just ring. If the parent’s in the school quite often I’m in the school, I always try and grab them and say let’s have a conversation. That’s the key, we can’t always be available. If one of my schools has an inkling of HE ever being mentioned, they tell me, within 48 hours I’ll have had some contact with that parent.’

23. When schools were able to, they advised parents of the support mechanisms that have been put in place for their child, of possible alternatives or of their assessment of home education as an option. One school had developed a new protocol for when a parent expresses an interest in moving to home education. This involved the school’s early help team and a letter to parents. Another comment from a school gives another example of proactive work with parents:

‘One of the shifts we made, we tried to be more proactive. We identified children with needs and tried to intervene earlier... it has opened up dialogue with parents and are willing to come and talk to us. We do think that we have had an impact.’

24. However, under current legislation, neither schools nor LAs are required to work with parents before a parent informs a school of their intention to move to home education.
25. In our research, schools and LAs were rarely informed about children moving to home education before them being removed from school. Schools and LAs are unable to support parents when they are considering home education unless they are informed early.
26. Indeed, some schools emphasised that they only found out about a parent’s intention to move to home education when the letter arrived. From the school’s perspective, this letter can be sudden. As one LA explains:

‘In our training we say, if you get any indication that a family might be going electively home educated, contact us. We can always have an independent conversation with the family and the school. Ideally that’s how it would work. Normally what happens is on Monday morning there’s a letter on the table saying: “I’m not coming back”. To be fair to the school they don’t often get a chance to do anything.’

27. Some LAs told us they were rarely informed about children moving to home education prior to them being removed from school. As one LA explained:
- ‘We get an e-form saying this child is now HE, and I go out and see them – they have already gone (to home education) before I make that response. Some parents are proactive and contact me.’
28. When a parent does inform a school that a child is being withdrawn to home education, the school must notify the LA of all deletions from the admission register.²⁴ There were some examples of schools and LAs working together before a child is removed from the school roll.
29. Fair access panels and inclusion strategy groups were being used in some LAs to identify and respond to children who are moving to and from home education.²⁵ One LA had developed a new procedure for supporting and challenging schools with high numbers of children moving to home education whereby issues are escalated to the service director.
30. Some LAs facilitated three-way meetings between parents, schools and LAs. As one LA explained, the meetings provide parents an opportunity to ‘air their views’ with an impartial representative from the LA. However, it was not always clear whether these meetings were happening before a child had moved to home education or after.
31. The discussion of communication between schools and LAs sometimes focused solely on the legal duty on schools to inform LAs. Outside of these requirements, schools have no legal duty to cooperate more widely with LAs when children move to home education.
32. Whether LAs and schools work together appeared to be dependent on individual relationships and local approaches. As an example, one representative of an LA referred to schools ‘giving us a heads up’ about children who move to home education.
33. Importantly, there were no clear steps for LAs and schools to work together before a child moves to home education. As one school explained:
- ‘there is a gap in the role of the local authority before the parent makes the formal decision.’

²⁴ ‘Elective home education: guidance for local authorities’, Department for Education, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education.

²⁵ The fair access protocols ‘make sure that, outside of the normal admissions rounds, unplaced children, particularly the most vulnerable, are offered a place at a suitable school as quickly as possible’.

34. Ofsted believes more action is needed before children move to home education.

Without dialogue before a child moves to home education, schools and LAs have no opportunity to listen to and consider what children think about their move.

35. Parents are legally responsible for how they educate their child and therefore for moving their children to home education. Whether children are part of any decision to home-educate depends on the individual parent.

36. We heard examples in which children were said to have been involved in the decision to move to home education. One parent told us that the decision had been their child's:

Interviewer: 'So the decision came from your daughter?'

Answer: 'Yes, very much so. We could have forced the issue to attend school as parents, but we were desperate. The decision was made.'

Children who took part in interviews said that family members had first mentioned the possibility of home education.

37. However, when we asked, parents in our research were reluctant to give details about how children were specifically involved in the decision. Instead, they told us how they had taken on their child's wishes, that the process was very easy or what home education was now like for their child.

38. When parents did tell us about their discussions with children, they made sure their child understood the consequences of home education. One parent:

'Sat down and had a family conversation about it for a few hours – got (their child's) feelings – how they would feel about learning at home, how they would maintain their friendship groups – all the things that would impact on the decision.'

39. But aside from the parent, there was little opportunity for anyone to hear the child's views. Schools and LAs did not always see it as their role to discuss home education with a child.

40. Although a few LA representatives' role was to work directly with the families and focus on the child, this was not the norm.

'I always open up with, if you would have any job in the world what would it be? A lot of kids are never asked what they want. You've got to hear the child's view. The main part of my job is listening to them and trying to move forward.'

41. Schools in our research did not talk to children about moving to home education. In one focus group, school leaders said the work they did with children was solely about the support in school.
42. When decisions happened quickly, at a crisis point, this was a barrier for schools to hearing the child's views. As one school leader stated:

'Once the letter comes about elective home education you do not see the child again.'
43. More dialogue is needed before a child moves to home education so that schools, LA and parents have the opportunity to seek children's views.
44. LAs and schools face some barriers in trying to access children's views on moving to home education.
45. Legally, LAs are responsible for ensuring that children are receiving a suitable education once they are home-educated. However, they do not have a right to enter the home or to see the child solely because a child is educated at home. In these circumstances, a parent determines whether an LA can speak to a child who has moved to home education.
46. Additionally, geographical barriers may mean LAs are not able to speak to children. One large LA discussed how work with families relies on telephone conversations. Some LAs that we spoke to had one representative who was responsible for working with all home-educating families in that LA.
47. Furthermore, children's views do not legally have to be considered in decisions about education, such as whether they are educated at school or home. LAs and schools do not have the powers to take on board children's views about moving to home education.
48. There need to be better mechanisms for considering children's views during decisions to home-educate, particularly when a child expresses a view not to be home educated when a parent is considering home education.

Relationship breakdowns between schools, parents and children

A breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents was always present in the cases in our research.

49. The families we spoke to had all recently moved to home education from secondary school as part of a breakdown in the relationship between the school and the parent or child.

50. LAs commonly spoke of the complete breakdown of relationships between parents and school staff. Some said there had been a loss of trust between the two parties. One LA representative said,

‘It’s almost in the first instance they will seek to (move to home education); well it’s not as simple as that. The relationship between the school and the parent is such that they feel the only option is to bail out and we’re finding more and more of those.’

51. Both school leaders and parents said that there was a lack of communication after the decision to home-educate had been made. For schools:

‘by the time it gets to that stage, their mind’s made up.’

Whereas for parents, some said once the decision to home-educate was made, they were ‘left to it’. One parent said:

‘there was nothing from school. They just accepted (it) and that was it.’

Parents and schools viewed home education as the only option.

52. When the relationship between school and parent has broken down, our research supports previous findings that some parents feel that home education is a last resort.²⁶ Parents in our research commonly viewed home education as the only option for them.
53. When we asked parents whether there were any other suitable alternatives, a common response was simply ‘no’. Parents told us they had tried other schools, but the moves were unsuccessful or other schools were unsuitable. Some parents had tried to move their child to specialist provision, such as a hospital school, but had been rejected.
54. Parents appeared to reach a crisis point when their child was at secondary school, at which point they moved their child to home education. Parents, almost invariably, described a cycle of children’s needs not being met and ineffective support from the schools. In parents’ discussions, there was a belief

²⁶ P Bower, ‘The home education experience: what can it teach us?’, UCL, Institute of Education, DEdPsych Thesis, 2017 <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.747185>; ‘Home education: constructions of choice’ Morton, 2010 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1052483>; ‘Home education for children with additional learning needs – a better choice or the only option?’ Maxwell, N Doughty, J, Slater, T, Forrester, D and Rhodes K, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131911.2018.1532955>; ‘Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school’, Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-hidden-children-the-challenges-of-safeguarding-children-who-are-not-attending-school.

that these difficulties were worsened by the school's approach. Some children were subsequently unable to cope at school, according to parents.

55. A few parents moved to home education despite not wanting to, or even being scared of doing so.

'It's scary. It's so scary... Knowing that you've got to do it. When you've got no choice because your kids are mentally suffering and you're going down a road you don't want to...'

56. Concerningly, schools too can view home education as a child's only option. One LA's comment suggested:

'There are some (schools) that are maybe giving it as an option and there are some that genuinely think they have no choice but to recommend that they go (to home education) so they haven't quite got it yet... To be fair to the school they're probably now at a desperate point of "I don't know quite what to do next with this child," and therefore the only option is to just let them go.'

57. A few parents thought that schools were relieved to be 'rid' of the problem.
58. It is not clear whether there were, in reality, any other options for parents or schools in these cases. Without more dialogue between parents, schools and LAs before a child moves to home education, parents and schools are unable to work together to consider other options and resolve issues.

Sometimes, children are left in the middle.

59. Some schools were frustrated that they were unable to act in what they thought were the best interests of the child. Schools highlighted concerns about children educated at home where they believed home education was not the best option for the child. In these cases, some schools were concerned that they had limited powers to advise parents.
60. Schools have a general duty to consider the welfare of pupils. Also, LAs must ensure that children are receiving a suitable education. However, participants were concerned about who was considering what was in the child's best interests.
61. Overall, parents and schools in our research had different understandings of what was best for children. School leaders were sometimes concerned about the reasons parents move their child to home education and the education that the children would receive, whereas parents were commonly concerned about the school environment not meeting their child's needs.

62. When relationships have broken down and there is disagreement about what is best for the child, children can be left in the middle. Parents' perceptions and school leaders' perceptions were clear. We cannot know from our evidence what was best for child. One school leader commented:

'Who's looking after the child?'

63. There is a clear case for national support and guidance in those cases where relationships between schools and parents have broken down. One school expressed a view that children should have an impartial advocate to advocate for the child in the process.

Home education as a means to resolve issues

Parents can move children to home education to avoid pressures at school.

64. Parents we spoke to had often moved away from school rather than choosing a better education in the home. Parents might value the educational environment that home education provides their child. However, when we asked parents what prompted the move to home education, none mentioned the benefits of home education.

65. For parents, the pressures of the difficulties at school can mean working with a number of professionals in school. Some leaders and parents said that extra meetings to help resolve issues cause extra burden to some families that they find difficult to manage. There was an acknowledgement by schools that it can be easier for parents to move to home education. One parent stated:

'It is easy to see how parents view home education as a viable option when things are difficult at school.'

66. Some participants were concerned that parents can move children to home education as a way to play the system. For example, some school leaders suggested that parents thought they may have an improved chance of re-enrolling their child to another school, after a period of home education.
67. Some school leaders identified parents opting to home-educate to avoid a permanent exclusion. However, no parents discussed in detail moving to home education to avoid an exclusion.

68. For some parents, facing fines or prosecution for a child missing school triggered a move a child to home education. Local councils and schools can use various legal powers if a child is missing school without a good reason, including a penalty notice or a school attendance order. School leaders and a few parents acknowledged that parents can move to home education to avoid penalties. One parent acknowledged:

‘I have been forced into doing it because there was no other option. If I didn’t I’d end up with a fine or prison.’

69. However, it was often unclear whether reasons for moving to home education such as penalty notices and exclusions, were a tactic to play the system. Although Ofsted would consider parents solely moving to avoid prosecution or scrutiny to be neglectful parenting, attendance fines or prosecution were rarely cited by parents as a sole reason for moving to home education.
70. For parents, attendance fines or prosecution were a result of children’s needs not being met at school. This, for example, led to a child’s anxiety, which then resulted in poor attendance and a subsequent penalty notice.
71. We have also seen examples in our inspection evidence of schools giving parents an ultimatum – permanent exclusion or leave – or pursuing fines when a reasonable adjustment for a disability would have been more appropriate.
72. It is clear that prosecution for non-attendance and permanent exclusions are sometimes a trigger for moves to home education. The reasons behind this are complex and at worst may include gaming from schools or neglectful parenting.

Children can be off-rolled into home education.

73. Unfortunately, we know that it is possible for schools to coerce parents to remove their child from the school roll.²⁷ Schools putting direct pressure on parents has been identified in local area SEND reviews, through complaints to Ofsted and Ofsted’s YouGov research into off-rolling, which showed that nearly a third of teachers believed that pupils who had been off-rolled moved to home education.²⁸ In our research, we saw a wider awareness that children can be off-rolled into home education.

²⁷ ‘Ofsted blog: What is off-rolling, and how does Ofsted look at it on inspection?’, Ofsted, 2019; <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2019/05/10/what-is-off-rolling-and-how-does-ofsted-look-at-it-on-inspection>.

²⁸ ‘Exploring the issue of off-rolling’, Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/off-rolling-exploring-the-issue.

74. We did not set out to assess whether off-rolling was happening in specific cases or schools. We cannot say for certain whether there were any cases of off-rolling. Our research did find examples that support other evidence that parents have been coerced into moving to home education.²⁹ For example, one LA had previously received letters from parents asking to move a child to home education that were written on school-headed paper but signed by parents.
75. In the main, school leaders told us about examples of procedures that aimed to prevent off-rolling and gaming the system or that they had to be careful about the ways in which they spoke to parents about home education. School leaders were clear that they would not pressurise parents into moving to home education. Some even said that they would never raise the subject of home education to parents.
76. Schools that do not participate in off-rolling children will act in the interests of the child rather than the school. Although schools that are wary of the power imbalance between parents and schools may choose not to mention home education first, what is most important is the interests of the child. In our research, a few school leaders stressed that schools' intentions were to support children the best way they can or talked about their commitment to children. Some school leaders talked about this commitment in terms of a moral duty.

'Schools are working as hard as they can to keep children in education.'

77. A few individuals across schools and LAs mentioned the need to recognise and reward the schools that do prioritise individual children's needs.

Applying indirect pressure to parents can be an easy option for schools.

78. Where inspections identify pressure being applied to parents to game the system in the interests of the school, directly or indirectly, we will consider this to be off-rolling. Unfortunately, our evidence suggests that letting children go can be an easy option for schools. Participants were aware that schools can also apply pressure to parents or children, indirectly.

²⁹ 'Illiterate parent was asked to sign off-rolling letter', Dave Speck, TES, 2019; www.tes.com/news/illiterate-parent-was-asked-sign-rolling-letter; 'Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-hidden-children-the-challenges-of-safeguarding-children-who-are-not-attending-school.

79. Schools face some pressures that can encourage decisions to be made in the interests of the school. A few school leaders commented that the pressures of the accountability context for secondary schools are a barrier to meeting the needs of some pupils. One school leader explained that vocational studies 'works for the pupils but not for the school data'. Progress in these subjects is not included in the Progress 8 measure.
80. In a minority of cases, a lack of school support was thought to be deliberately designed to let children leave. Sometimes parents and LAs in our research questioned whether schools were always conscientiously trying to meet children's needs. Individuals from LAs said they could distinguish between schools that tried to meet children's needs and those that did not. YouGov's recent survey identified teachers who suggested senior leaders can be very quick to accept the parents' notification of their intention to move to home education and are not necessarily acting in the best interests of the pupil.³⁰
81. Previous research has shown that parents with low understanding of the education system are most at risk of being pressured by schools to remove their children.³¹ In our research, some school leaders commented that some parents who move to home education can have medical or mental ill-health issues, over and above their children. In these cases, children may need more support from schools, not less.
82. We cannot know from our data what the true intentions of school leaders or parents were when children moved to home education. What is clear is that schools and parents face pressures to move to home education for reasons other than it being the preferred method of education for the child. We are concerned about any children who have been moved under these circumstances.

Some parents and children left unprepared for moving to home education

Home education is a huge undertaking for parents.

83. Almost all parents wanted more support for those who home-educate to help them get started. Once a child is removed from a school's roll, the parent is responsible for that child's education. Schools, LAs and parents recognised that this is a huge undertaking.

³⁰ 'Exploring the issue of off-rolling', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/off-rolling-exploring-the-issue.

³¹ 'Exploring the issue of off-rolling', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/publications/off-rolling-exploring-the-issue.

84. Individuals across all groups told us how important it is for parents to know what they are taking on. Parents advised just how hard home education is.

‘There must be some kind of help because the minute you go down home education, you’re on your own and that is hard. I have to get them what they need to survive in this world: they need GCSEs otherwise they’re not going to get into college, they’re not going to get to university and it’s a massive, massive weight on your shoulders as a parent. And especially when you didn’t want to go down that road.’

85. Parents are also solely responsible for the cost of home education.

‘There’s no help, not even paper. We go through astronomical amounts and actually we’re doing the education a favour by educating our children, so why isn’t there books or paper - just anything to help because there is a massive financial impact.’

86. In extreme circumstances, parents expected that education would be provided by the LA out of school, according to some LAs and schools.

‘It’s very easy to misunderstand and think, well, there’s a council there, there’ll be a budget there to help us with these sorts of things and there’ll be support services.’

87. A minority of parents moved their child to home education despite knowing that they could not provide an education:

‘I made it clear I’ve not got the experience or funds for home schooling and I’ve made that clear to the authorities. So my daughter is receiving nothing at all.’

There is a clear case for more support for parents and children.

88. Neither schools, LAs nor parents are required to ensure that children are prepared for home education. Indeed, there was no clear evidence in our study of how schools, LAs and parents were preparing children for home education.

89. Despite this, some children in our study wanted more support. Three children said that they would have liked to have spoken to a home-educated child before moving so they could get a feeling for what home education is like. One child’s suggestion shows what children need to know before they move to home education:

‘How many GCSEs are needed for jobs/universities. Five GCSEs are usually the minimum, including mathematics and English language.’

How to take GCSEs, including entry deadlines, exam centres or schools, financial costs, a list of possible tutors, resources, and access to past papers.

How home education can work, including the importance of self-study, the flexibility of your timetable, and examples of other people who have home educated and what they did/learned through their experiences.'

90. Curriculum choices are particularly important for children who are at secondary school age as it impacts their future choices and destinations.
91. Parents wanted information on the level of attainment that their child was currently achieving to help them know what their child should be learning. Too many parents told us that schools had refused to provide them with their child's work.

'My child was heartbroken about a lot of the workbooks because they're a perfectionist, so their workbooks were very tidy, the writing was very neat. And they weren't able to get them. That would have helped because then that would have given me a starting point, as to where to go academically to what levels, what subjects are being covered in that year. But I got nothing so that makes it harder.'

92. Schools and LAs said that home-educating parents should be supported with more information on what their responsibilities are.
93. Parents said that they would have benefited from information and guidance on the financial cost for home education. In addition, parents would have liked to have known more about the college provision in the local area and information about where their children could sit external examinations.
94. Although, legally, a decision to educate a child at home is the parents' responsibility, our research suggests that, in some cases, the support available is not enough to ensure that it is a fully informed decision. In these cases, we are concerned about the quality of home education. We cannot know from our data whether all children are receiving the education they deserve.
95. Furthermore, in some LAs, alternative part-time education, such as college placements and alternative provision, were sometimes facilitated through home education. One LA representative said:

'The kids that have come out, they do not have learning difficulties but need it explaining in a different way, start messing around because they don't really know what to do, have behaviour issues, when move to (part time alternative provision) and they have time to get it. Small groups so have time to invest in doing that. Child starts to feel like they're being listened to.'

96. Colleges and other institutions are able to provide part-time education for home-educated pupils. However, LAs had different approaches to facilitating this provision.
97. Additionally, in our response to the recent government consultation on children not in school, we highlighted our concerns about those part-time settings that do not have to be regulated. We have no way of knowing whether the education that the children are receiving in unregulated settings is of a good standard.
98. Indeed, a few parents were concerned about whether children were always getting the education they deserved.

One parent said:

'We were told someone from the LA would be in touch, but nobody did. We could have been doing anything, shopping every day, no one would know.'

Another parent said:

'We enjoyed the home visit from the LA. But this was a year later after the decision had been made, and previously no one had been in touch to check how she was doing.'

Who should provide support, and how, is unclear.

99. In the absence of a national framework of support, schools and LAs had different approaches to providing support to parents.
100. Parents wanted more information and support from schools, for example for schools to provide resources, guidance or access to external examinations. Yet, schools are not required to support a child once they have been removed from their roll and may not have the resources to do so.
101. A minority of schools did provide support to home-educating parents. At the extreme end, one school kept in contact with the parent after their child had been removed from the school roll. The school offered online access to curriculum materials and for the child to sit external examinations:

'I always keep the door open, once they've decided to leave, whether it's a previously HE going back to that or going with dissatisfaction, I will leave the door open, always, always will continue to allow to use us as exam centre, I will pay for exams.'
102. Some schools were confused about what advice they should provide to parents. Some schools advised on whether home education was appropriate, whereas

others said the legislation meant they could not be involved. For example, one leader said:

‘There is local authority guidance that once they are home schooled, as a school you should not be providing them with anything.’

103. Some school leaders were also concerned that sharing information with parents about home education could be seen as off-rolling of pupils. However, we believe there is a clear difference between providing parents with information and guidance after a parent’s intention to move to home education had been expressed and pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll.

104. Clear direction for schools is needed on the advice they can provide parents.

105. Similarly, while some LAs were willing to be proactively involved in decisions, some were wary of the balance between informing parents and encouraging moves to home education.

106. One LA identified tensions around how schools and LAs can be involved in moves to home education as:

‘understanding parents’ rights and choices but, actually, can we explore the reasons, and have you thought this through? and informing them of what they have taken on.’

107. Schools and LAs are left to find the balance between acting in a child’s interests and following the legislation. Some school leaders and LAs said a ‘cooling-off’ period for parents to consider their final decision to home-educate would be useful. However, parents did not mention that a cooling-off period would be helpful. The current legislation is unclear as to whether cooling-off periods are supported.

108. Furthermore, cooling-off periods happen after a parent has initially moved their child to home education. Work to resolve difficulties that happens after a child has moved to home education may be too late.

109. Parents’ decisions were sometimes unaffected by work carried out by LAs and schools after a parent’s letter removing their child had been received, according to LAs and schools.

‘The school engaged me (as the LA representative) to try and build the bridge, I did join home visits with their staff. Lots of work but that family did still choose to write the letter – 6 weeks of work to try.’

110. A few LAs have implemented a local policy for children returning from home education: that they must attend the school that they left. This approach was noted as demonstrating a commitment to combatting off-rolling. In one focus group, school leaders nodded in agreement to one leader’s comment:

'taking away the incentive to home educate where parents prefer a different school. Also a way of local schools showing that they were not gaming the system because there is an agreement that they will take children back if home education doesn't work out.'

- 111. However, this approach does not focus on resolving issues before a child moves to home education. When relationships have broken down, sending a child back to the same school without resolving issues may not be best for the child.
- 112. Instead, issues could have been identified earlier. The issues behind moves to home education had developed over time. An overwhelming theme from parents was the difficulties their child had faced during their time at secondary school and sometimes for longer. One parent referred to her child's secondary school as having to 'pick up the pieces (from primary) and not having the time or resources to do so.'
- 113. Schools, parents and LA need clear guidance on how to resolve issues together, before a child moves to home education. If the situation had changed within a child's school and schools had addressed their child's needs, some parents said they would have considered keeping their children in mainstream education.

A way forward

- 114. Home education is a legitimate parental choice and can be a positive choice. Children should be moved to home education when it is the best place for their education, not as a means to resolve difficulties in school.
- 115. Our exploratory study suggests there is a significant gap in support and steps that help all parents and children to make a fully informed and positive choice about home education.
- 116. The DfE's recent consultation on children not in school is a significant step forward.³² We would welcome any potential legislative changes that would allow a range of different agencies to better support parents and home-educated children. In our response to the consultation, we identified need for resources and support for home-educating parents at a national level. Schools and LAs then need guidance on a consistent approach to supplementing that support.

³² 'Children not in school', Department for Education, 2019; <https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/children-not-in-school>.

117. Nationally, we need to consider our response to children who have been moved to home education to resolve difficulties, rather than because it was the preferred method of education. We highlighted some of the risks to children in a recent commentary.³³ However, as this report shows, it may be that many children who leave school to be home educated are simply not getting the education they deserve.

³³ 'Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school', Ofsted, 2019; www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-hidden-children-the-challenges-of-safeguarding-children-who-are-not-attending-school.

Annex

Fig 1: Number of participants who took part in interviews or focus groups in each local authority

Local authority	School leaders	Parents	Local authority members	Children
A	5	1	2	1
B	4	5	2	1
C	7	3	4	0
D	5	2	2	2
E	7	2	2	0
F	4	8	3	0
G	4	2	1	0
Total	36	23	16	4

Fig 2: Participants who participated in the online questionnaire or written methods

Local authority in which the respondent resided	Children	Parents
B	2	2
C	n/a	n/a
D	1	6
Total	3	8

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