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Research and analysis

# Exploring moving to home education in secondary schools: research summary

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

This small, exploratory study in the East Midlands investigates moving to home education from secondary school, as opposed to at other times.<sup>3</sup> 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 increase of approximately 27% from the previous year.<sup>4 5</sup> In particular, many children moved to home education from secondary school.<sup>6</sup>

More children with additional needs are now being educated at home.<sup>7</sup> 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 setting<sup>8</sup> have special educational needs, are from disadvantaged backgrounds or are known to social care services, or have a combination of these characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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 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. We have not looked at all at the content or quality of what is being taught at home.

# **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.<sup>11</sup>

## 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.

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

Those who took part may have particular perspectives about moving to home education that would affect our understanding of the research question.<sup>15</sup>

We are not also able to say how common it is for schools to pressurise parents into moving to home education.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, 7 children took part.

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1. [Elective home education – guide for parents, Department for Education, 2019](#) ↵
  2. [Hidden children: the challenges of safeguarding children who are not attending school, Ofsted, 2019](#) and [Skipping school: invisible children, Children's Commissioner, 2019](#) ↵
  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. Read [Local authorities and home education, Ofsted, 2010](#). ↵
  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](#) ↵

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.](#) ↵
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. Data on these cohorts as outlined in: [Timpson review of school exclusion, Department for Education, 2019](#), [Exploring the issue of off-rolling, Ofsted, 2019](#), and [Elective home education survey, ADCS, 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. Read: [Ofsted blog: What is off-rolling, and how does Ofsted look at it on inspection?, Ofsted, 2019.](#) ↵
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. ↵
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. ↵
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 of the main report. ↵
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](#); [The legacy of home schooling: case studies of late adolescents in transition. Goymer, 2001.](#) ↵
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. ↵

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