

Cambs HE Forum, 15th March 2023

After a couple of years break (COVID), the Cambs HE Forum finally met up again in March of this year.

A huge amount of ground was covered in the two-hour meeting, but, with so much to squeeze in, not surprisingly, it didn't all fit. However, plans are already being made to follow up on what was discussed in future forums. With an introduction from the new head of EHE at the LA, Luthfur Rahman, and our first use of Zoom for those that couldn't make it in person, we had our biggest participation and engagement from the local HEing community ever!

Attendees

From the LA:

Luthfur Rahman (LR): Education Legal Manager

Donna Simmons (DS): Senior Business Officer

Home Educators:

In person: 17

On zoom: 34 signed in

Zoom coordinator: Kate Sharp

Chair: Caroline Shortmoor

Meeting Highlights

Fabulous presentations from Jennie (school refuser, SEN) and Nancy-Ann (unschooled, GCSEs and beyond), discussed their own HE journeys. (For those that missed it, transcripts by Jenny and Nancy-Ann are below.)

Zoom:

The Zoom attendees found Nancy-Ann and Jennie's talks very useful.

There were several questions on the Zoom chat about SEN support, access to assessments, and a general feeling that schools were failing to meet children's needs.

The Zoom chat also had some questions about flexi-schooling, which Luthfur confirmed was at the headteacher/school's discretion.

Luthfur Rahman (LR) and the Cambs School Attendance team:

LR is part of the Cambridgeshire School Attendance Team. His job title is Education Legal Manager, but may sign off as Elective Home Education (EHE) Manager, as his job entails both roles.

He reports into Karen Beaton (KB) who manages both the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough School Attendance Teams. (Still waiting for a full copy of the organisational

structure from LR.)

LR was at pains to stress that for the purposes of these meetings “[he is] Karen Beaton”. Business Officers are what in old skool speak used to be known as Admin staff/Administrators, or for the really old skool, Secretaries.

Cambridge has never gone the whole way through court proceedings to serving an attendance order to a family where it is considered that there might be a child missing education (CME). This is deemed by the LA as “a success”, as they appear to pride themselves on always getting the documentation they are after before it gets that far. We were informed that this should be “reassuring” for home educators, and they emphasised how they are not like other more “punitive” LAs.

There was a distinct discomfort at being asked to sign correspondence with their own names as well as job titles. It will be asked again.

Exams:

For this year, up to £300 funding will be open for GCSE or equivalent students in year 11 (if they were in the school system – 15-16 year olds), who are sitting exams this summer, and are registered with the LA.

A receipt of payment for the exams your child is down to take this summer will also be needed to claim the funding.

Previously, you had to be registered by year 10 to qualify for the funding in year 11. They have changed this so that there is now no minimum amount of time your child has to be registered with the LA.

LR said funding application information was sent out to all known Year 11 students in March.

Reports and forms:

Reports will continue to be accepted.

Many people were unhappy with the current yearly report forms, particularly with the fact that questions were mandatory. The LA has said that it will consider making changes to the questions on the annual form, based on our suggestions. Over 16s are not required to have a form or report completed for them if they are known to the LA. LR was very unenthusiastic about providing confirmation of either receipt or acceptance of reports and forms – limited resources. It was also requested that the LA’s email address be more prominent on letters to make it easier to send reports. Again, there was reticence. DS and LR took notes on all these issues and although not always keen, they did seem open to some possible changes.

SEND:

HE children are not excluded from SEND support, and (in theory) can access all the same funding and services a schooled child can.

SENDIASS (SEND Information, Advice and Support Services) can be contacted directly by the parent and, although a council-funded organisation, they offer “impartial and

confidential information, advice and support to parents and carers who have a child or young person with special educational needs (SEN) or a disability or have concerns that their child has special educational needs” (https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/SEND_Information__Advice_and_Support_Service.pdf, www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/pps).

The LA suggested that the next meeting could be with the LA SEND team, as they were not equipped to answer all the SEN specific questions. Consequently, most SEND questions have been held back until we have a meeting with the LA and SEND team. Parent recommendations:

The Cambridgeshire SEND parent/Carer Support Facebook Group (Cambridgeshire SEND PARENT/carers support group) for advice and information.

<https://www.littlecraftersboxes.co.uk> for resources.

Future meetings:

The LA is planning to try to attend an HE Forum in June 2023, October 2023 and Feb/March 2024 – obviously timed to avoid public examinations and school holidays.

Minutes

[Just as nothing in home ed fits nicely into boxes, neither did conversation at the meeting, so points made throughout the meeting have been reordered to fit the original agenda, grouping topics to make for easier reading and referencing.]

Introduction to Luthfur Rahman (LR)

Having worked in the Cambridgeshire LA for 12 years, LR has recently moved to the position of Education Legal Manager. In this role, he is part of the School Attendance Team, and aside from working with schools and families whose children struggle with school attendance, he is also responsible for ensuring children missing education (CME) are brought back into education. For some reason that I wouldn't like to suppose, the LA have always grouped these roles with that of 'Elective Home Education (EHE) Manager', consequently, LR may sign off correspondence as either EHE Manager or Education Legal Manager.

Prior to LR, these roles were filled by Karen Beaton (KB) in her position as County Attendance & Behaviour Manager. This meant she directly managed the Cambridgeshire School Attendance team, and by extension was therefore the EHE manager too. As she was deemed as being so successful at this role, she then took responsibility for this position in both the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough LAs simultaneously.

KB's recent(ish) promotion, to Strategic Admissions and Attendance Manager Cambridgeshire & Peterborough at Cambridgeshire County Council, means she still oversees the School Attendance Teams for both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, but does not directly manage either School Attendance or EHE anymore. However, we have

been assured that her values and attitudes towards home educators still trickles down and dictates the tone the LA takes towards current home educators in terms of day-to-day interaction – as LR was at pains to express, for the sake of these meetings, “I am Karen Beaton”.

In his role as EHE Manager, LR sees himself as a continuation of KB and plans to conduct his interactions with home educators very much in the same vein as KB did.

Introduction To Home Ed (for those that are new to it)

LR asked for a brief introduction to the world of HE, so it was explained that there is no such thing as a typical home educator; we all come with our own educational backgrounds, family set ups and dynamics, school-related issues, financial situations, etc., meaning that no one situation will ever look exactly the same as another. Consequently, no one in our community is really in a position to represents anyone else outside of their own family. We each speak for ourselves, and any opinion we express is our own, unless someone has expressly asked another individual to speak on their behalf, due to inability to attend relevant meetings (e.g. the Cambs HE Forums), or where there is a need to have just one spokesperson (national HE groups that are in discussions with government and other official bodies, e.g. HEQA).

It was also explained that we each take a different route to educating our children, be it unschooling, community groups, private tuition, home-ed co-ops, school-at-home etc. etc. However, what is apparent from the first glances at the Cambridgeshire Home Education Survey 2023, child-led approaches are the most common, with 72.5% of current home educators who filled in the survey saying that they have at some point followed a child-led approach to their home education, with workbooks, unschooling, project-based learning and forest schools all coming in around the 40-45% mark. And currently, 52.2% would describe the education they provide as being child-led. Workbooks (39.1%), unschooling (36.2%), exams (33.3%), and online courses/remote learning (30.4%) being the next most popular. To further complicate the picture of what home educating in Cambridgeshire looks like, even within the same family, different styles of education may be adopted for different children, with it falling as roughly a 50:50 split between those who adopt different styles for different children and those who maintain the same styles for all the children that they home educate.

Nancy-Ann and Jennie then bravely shared their own stories of how they came to be home educating, the styles they adopted and the outcomes so far. They have both been kind enough to transcribe their own sections, so as to keep their stories in their own words. These can be found at the bottom of this post.

[In the past, including these personal experiences in the forum has been particularly useful to families who are new to home education, as they might not yet have had time to go to any of the organised activities, spoken to too many other home educators, or this could be there first real intro to the world of HE. They are also helpful to the LA as it gives them

insight into how people really home educate and the issues they face.]

Topic 1

Structure of the LA's Education Department

Roles and titles within LA

Still waiting for the LA to send a full list of roles within the Cambs LA that are relevant to Cambs home educators, however, the basic structure has:

Karen Beaton (KB): head of School Admissions and Appeals.

In this position, the Schools Attendance Team is answerable to her. Directly answerable to KB is:

Luthfur Rahman (LR): Senior named lead officer for Elective Home Education (a member of the School Admissions Team, as well as Education Legal Manager).

And working with him is:

Donna Simmons (DS): Senior Business Officer

[A 'business officer' is effectively a member of the admin team; these are the people who send out the letters, answer calls etc. As 'senior' business officer, Donna manages the business officer team.]

Within the department, there are also LA Attendance Officers (LAAO) who work with EHE too, following up on forms to see if people need support. I am not certain if they report directly into KB or LR, but this should become apparent once the LA send through a copy of their Education department structure.

Also directly answerable to KB are two full-time Children Missing Education (CME) Officers, a number that they are looking to increase.

Peterborough

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's School Attendance teams were moving closer together with many positions merging, hence KB being the Attendance officer directly responsible for EHE 'management' at both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. But they are now starting to move further away from each other again, with both areas maintaining their own separate School Attendance Teams. Karen Beaton's role has changed as she has taken on more responsibilities, so although she is still ultimately in charge of both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's School Attendance teams (as well as the additional roles of Admissions and other things), she has delegated direct EHE management to others in the Attendance Teams. This means that although the Cambs HE Forum is still relevant to Peterborough Home Educators, what is said in it may not directly apply to

Peterborough.

How families are processed through the Elective Home Education/Children Missing Education/school attendance system

LA has a legal responsibility to track children missing education. However, LR said that they have never had to take a case all the way through court to get a school attendance order on someone. This was hailed by LR as a success, as he said either home educators provided the information the LA needed (to prove an education was being provided), or people enrolled their children into school.

In order to ascertain if a child is missing education, a letter is sent to a family with a request to respond within 15 days. If this letter is ignored, a member of the LA will knock on the door. They will then keep “putting pressure” on the family until they get the piece of paper they need saying how the family are educating the child at home, or until the child is registered in a school.

[School Attendance Orders: <https://educationalfreedom.org.uk/how-many-home-educated-children-in-the-uk/> An Educational Freedom FOI request, enabling a comparison by LA of the number of school attendance orders issued 2022-23.]

How families are processed through the SEND system

Home-Educated children are *not* excluded from SEND support.

You do not need a referral, and can get directly in contact with SEND Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) yourself:

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/directory/local-authority-service/SENDIASS>

“They offer impartial information, advice and support to parents of children of all ages, and young people up to the age of 25. It is confidential and open to all levels of need.”

Referrals for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can also go through YOUNited, an NHS department for up to 25-year olds that offers a range of support including therapies, counselling and guided self-help:

<https://www.cpft.nhs.uk/younited/>

They principally concentrate on emotional wellbeing and mental health, but you do need a GP to refer you. LR explicitly stated that parents need to really push for an appointment with their GP to get anywhere; like CAMHS, they are seriously underfunded and over subscribed, so many GPs hold off referring children and young people if they possibly can.

Parents at the forum also recommended the Cambridgeshire SEND PARENT/carer support group on Facebook, for advice, support and general information.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/CambridgeshireSEN/>

Top

SEND

As we had so many questions regarding SEND, and the EHE team were not really in a position to answer them all, it was decided that it would be best to have another HE forum with the LA SEND team there themselves. LR will invite them along to the next meeting that will hopefully be in June/July. Consequently, all other SEND questions were put on hold until then.

Topic 2

LA and EHE

“What is the LA doing to reduce the number of children who ‘electively’ home educated [sic] due to school failure to meet needs at school, resulting in school trauma?”

LR said that this is addressed in the 2022 Department for Education document, Working Together to Improve School Attendance.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance>

LR stated that this guidance means that schools are legally obliged to help with regard to things like mental health problems, school trauma etc. and other concerns that impact on a child’s school attendance.

“Securing good attendance cannot therefore be seen in isolation, and effective practices for improvement will involve close interaction with schools’ efforts on curriculum, behaviour, bullying, special educational needs support, pastoral and mental health and wellbeing, and effective use of resources, including pupil premium. It cannot solely be the preserve of a single member of staff, or organisation, it must be a concerted effort across all teaching and non- teaching staff in school, the trust or governing body, the local authority, and other local partners.”

Working Together to Improve School Attendance (p6)

LR said that schools will not go against this as it will be against the law...

However, the guidance will not actually become statutory until at least September 2023 (p5).

How is the LA tackling inadequate SEND and mental health support in schools?

Answer given as above.

What is the Ordinarily Available Provision Tool Kit

(<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/local-offer/>)

cambridgeshire-send-transformation-programme/ordinarily-available-provision-toolkit)?
Question saved for the SEND Cambs HE forum.

How do the LA adapt their policies to fit the Define Fine and SEND Code of Practice policies. (<https://definefine.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/NFISDefine-Fine-Schools-Guide-Summary-V3.pdf>) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>)

Question saved for the SEND Cambs HE forum.

Which other bodies' expertise do the LA take into account when making EHE/SEND/mental health policies?

Question saved for the SEND Cambs HE forum.

The Offer

(https://www.cambslearntogether.co.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/Unregistered%20Schools%20Strategy%20-%20Cambridgeshire%20and%20Peterborough%20January%20.._.pdf section 6.4)

What's happened to it?

'The Offer' is still very much alive and kicking, apparently, and everything to do with the offer and EHE is on the LA's website:

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/education-your-rights-and-responsibilities/elective-home-education-ehe>

This website is regularly updated, but currently you do have to keep checking to see what has been updated. It was pointed out that people need a prompt to let them know when to look again and where in particular to look on the site for new content. DS said that they were looking into possible solutions.

In the meantime, DS and LR have asked HEors to send their HE links to the LA so that they can add them to the other links already on the website.

Exam funding?

Financial help with exams is currently back on offer, but this time you don't need to have been registered with the LA for two years prior to applying for it. It is open for any home-educated student in year 11, who is taking a recognised national or international exam this summer, regardless of when they have registered with the LA.

All families with a registered year 11 home-educated child will be sent a standard letter between January and March informing them that they are able to claim up to £300 for exams that they have already paid for, to be sat in the coming summer.

If you do not hear anything from the LA by April, and you believe you are entitled to apply for this funding, do get in contact with them to enquire.

It was asked if the LA would ever consider paying the exam centre directly for those that cannot afford the initial layout. LR said they would have to talk to KB about that before they can answer. However, if you find yourself in this position, do try talking to the LA directly – although they might not be able to make it an open policy, it is possible that there may be some leeway for individual cases.

Is there any benefit to being known by the LA?

No time to ask, but it can be assumed that they will direct us back to The Offer as an answer to that question. Whether that is enough of a benefit to make it worthwhile self-registering with the LA is obviously a personal judgement.

Exams

What information is the LA giving to home educators that come to them looking for advice on the how's/where's/when's to sit exams?

No time to ask.

Could the LA use its influence to open up more options to HEors, such as making the Children's University scheme an option for HEors in Cambridgeshire, asking schools if they would allow HEors to sit KS3 qualification etc.,

No time to ask.

[The Children's University have (of their own accord) now opened their scheme up to home educators: <https://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/get-involved/parents-and-children/>.]

Does the LA have a list of colleges/courses etc. (e.g. 14-16 courses) HEed students could access? (especially courses that help people who can't normally access exams due to problems with lack of exam centres get the basic GCSEs/functional skills qualifications, or 'stepping stone' courses that equip them for later learning/apprenticeships etc. without them having to have already attained GCSEs).

DS said that this couldn't be done as it would be 'advertising' some places of learning over others.

[It would be good if we could try and put this together as a community, so that those families who for whatever reason can't/don't want to do exams at home, can see what options they have going forward. I will send a post out about this at a later date.]

Support for additional needs and neurodiversity: diagnosis and referrals

How is the LA working to make it easier for HE children to access services and diagnostic pathways, e.g. SALT (speech and language therapy), OT (occupational therapy), paediatricians, autism and ADHD assessments, as well as getting an EHCP for support now or in the future?

The LA reiterated that these services are open to home-educated children as much as for

any schooled child, and for anyone looking for a diagnosis, to get in touch with SENDIASS (<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/directory/local-authority-service/SENDIASS>) or YOUnited (<https://www.cpft.nhs.uk/youunited/>).

[That in itself did not fully answer the question, so it will be asked again at the SEND Cambs HE forum.]

Topic 3

Home Education – unschooling, deschooling, child-led approaches

The LA's thoughts on unschooling approaches to HE, particularly in the context of: specific neurotypes, extreme school trauma, and mental health concerns

LA's understanding of SEND or mental health concerns with regard to educating a child outside of school

How does the LA define success?

Are the same standards expected for all children/teens regardless?

Concern that HEors may be demanded to change the way they do things when children are blossoming

Lack of desire to share this approach with the LA – due to fear of negative feedback

What does the LA think to a child-led approach to home education?

What if a child finds physical activity/socialising or formal learning very difficult due to mental health needs?

Are they still expected to be performing at the same level as their contemporaries?

What if a GP, CAMHS or a health professional could attest to this?

Most of these questions were saved for the SEND Cambs HE forum, however, a few of them were touched upon within a wider conversation about unschooling and deschooling.

They will come up again in the SEND focused forum, where we will hopefully get more clarity/reassurance on these points.

Deschooling

LR said the LA takes the same line on deschooling as the government guidelines:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791527/Elective_home_education_guidance_for_LAv2.0.pdf (section 6.2, p15).

Which is to interpret de-schooling as not being the provision of a suitable education.

However, this may be a question of semantics... reading between the lines, it appears that what home educators think of as deschooling may be different to what the government and the LA think of as de-schooling.

[Further understanding on this can be seen on Ed Yourself (<https://edyourself.org/articles/guidelines.php>):

“The guidance says there is no legal basis for not educating your child because you are deschooling. It doesn’t mean you have to have a timetable, or be using textbooks or worksheets, as you can see from paragraphs elsewhere about suitable education. Paragraph 6.2 of the guidance says “Families beginning home education sometimes state that they are entitled to a period during which the home education provided for the child may not meet the requirements in s.7 because they are still, as it were, building up the provision to a satisfactory level. Some parents may go further and describe this period as being necessary for ‘de- schooling’. There is no legal basis for such a position. Any statement along these lines could be an indication that the child is not being properly educated.”

“The guidance says families should be aiming to offer satisfactory home education from the outset, “and to have made preparations with that aim in view” [6.3] which is not saying families must have a detailed plan or programme, rather that they should try and think ahead and not just dwell on past problems with school which risks giving the impression that the decision to home educate is purely reactive against school, widely seen as a “negative” reason where parents are reluctant and not really committed to home education.“

edyourself.org

Educational Freedom gives more info on deschooling:

<https://educationalfreedom.org.uk/deschooling/>]

Unschooling

LR didn’t really pass any comment on unschooling, beyond both he and Donna not being entirely sure what it is. It was described to them, and had already been illustrated by Nancy-Ann’s presentation, but there remained a lot of vagueness in their vocalised thoughts to it, and numerous non-committal murmurings. Again, reading between the lines, there appeared to be much doubt around it as a form of education, and it perhaps has too many similarities to deschooling for LA comfort.

[For families who do deschool/unschool (as a home educator would define it; a thought-out educational philosophy, which provides targeted learning opportunities that are deliberately accessed through formats that share no resemblance to those one would expect to find in a formal school setting, as opposed to how it is often perceived, as simply not providing an education), Educational Freedom can give advise on how best to describe that provision of education in a report format.

Unschooling info: <https://educationalfreedom.org.uk/unschooling-and-autonomous-home-education/>

How to write a report guide:

<https://educationalfreedom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Educational-Freedom-guide-to-report-writing-323-2.pdf>

Advice and support: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/educationalfreedomgroup/>

Topic 4

The Annual Forms

Online forms

Concerns with the current forms were aired including non-mandatory mandatory fields, inappropriate wording for home educators, non-sensical questions etc. General complaints with the forms were registered by LR and DS, but the response at this stage was very non-committal.

Who writes the forms?

Lots of different people, but no-one in particular.

Could the HE community play a part in writing them in future?

Suggestions collected from local HE platforms for how the forms could be made more user friendly have been sent, including highlighted problems and rewording of some of the current questions. LR has said they will be considered.

Could an example of one filled in be available, as many don't know what is wanted of them in these forms?

There was resistance from LR on this, as he believed we would all just copy the worked example straight into the form.

Reports

HEors told they are not allowed to submit their own reports

LR said that this was categorically not true. We are still perfectly entitled to send in reports if we prefer doing that to filling in the form. There was again resistance to it being highlighted as an option in the annual letters and on the forms, or an email/postal address specifically given for people to send in their own reports.

The LA very much gave the impression that it would rather we all fill in the forms as apparently, with reports, people have a tendency to give insufficient information, saying "what, not how".

I'm assuming he meant people say they do 'maths and literacy', but don't give details of how these subjects are being covered, e.g. cooking, shopping, workbooks, exam syllabuses etc. I have asked for clarity to exactly what LR meant by this, but I'm still waiting to hear back.

It was also suggested that the LA could provide a 'framework' for the report responses, so as to ensure people say 'how, not what', but this was rejected for the same reasons as form worked examples; it was believed we would all just copy and paste any examples given to us, even if we were only given templates.

[For those preferring to send in a report rather than filling in the form, a framework can be found on...

Educational Freedom:

<https://educationalfreedom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Educational-Freedom-guide-to-report-writing-323-2.pdf> – how to write a report guide.

And advice, support and report checking can be found on their facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/educationalfreedomgroup/>.

Reports can be sent directly by email to the EHE team:

[https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/education-your-rights-and-responsibilities/elective-home-education-ehe#contact-the-elective-home-education-team-4-0. \]](https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/education-your-rights-and-responsibilities/elective-home-education-ehe#contact-the-elective-home-education-team-4-0.)

It was highlighted to the LA that people reported on the whole preferring the forms to reports, as they were generally much easier and quicker to do, it was just that certain aspects of those forms were not working as well as they might. LR said they would consider any suggestions we sent in.

Concerns

People are concerned that the LA has forgotten HE law, and are starting to overstep the mark and their legal remit, despite it being very clearly stated in the LA's Unregistered Schools Strategy, Jan 2019, sections 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3:

https://www.cambslearntogether.co.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/Unregistered%20Schools%20Strategy%20-%20Cambridgeshire%20and%20Peterborough%20January%20.._.pdf

No time to explore this topic.

Why do the LA ask for the forms/reports? And what do they do with them all?

No time to ask.

What process would the LA follow if they were not happy with any aspect of the form/report?

LR said that they get in contact with a family who have sent an incomplete report and ask for more clarity on the specific area in question. If you hear nothing back, LR said that you can assume "no news is good news". This was not greeted very positively by home educators present, but LR clearly felt that time spent on 'unnecessary' communication was time wasted.

Topic 5

LA Communication

This topic ended up being discussed tied in with the annual forms/reports, and the lack of

response when forms and reports are sent in. LR's general philosophy was "no news is good news". Quite a few home educators in the room voiced why this was not the case for them, but the response from LR did not give much hope that this policy would be changing anytime soon.

There was also little positive response to the idea of correspondence being signed off by people's names rather than just job title. It was highlighted that this gives an air of transparency and accountability that would enable home educators to feel more secure in their communication with the LA, but it didn't appear that this was understood by the LA or that they were going to take this suggestion on board.

It was highlighted that people did on the whole appreciate certain aspects of LA communication, such as the information being sent about vaccines, which the LA seemed glad to hear and supported what they had already heard from HEors directly.

Some of the names, contact numbers and email addresses for the Transition Advisors for year 11 children don't match up or are out of date. Could these be checked and amended, please?

Asked. DS took note of it, and said they would look into it.

Any Other Business

Open to the floor

Chris, husband of Parkside swimming organiser, Antonia, asked about the possibility of council funding for Cambridge HE swimming lessons. This was taken note of by LR and DS.

Future Meetings

The LA is planning on trying to attend an HE Forum in June 2023, October 2023 and Feb/March 2024 – obviously timed to avoid public examinations.

The next one will hopefully be with the LA SEND team at the end of June.

Nancy-Ann: Home Ed Experience

Talk Transcript of Home Educator (in her own words): autonomous learning/unschooling approach

Introduction:

Thank Caroline for inviting me here to talk for about 10 mins about my son and his home educating journey.

Our son started school for the first time last September at the age of 16 and 1/2.

Early years before Primary School age

We had no plan to home educate. I planned to return to work once he started school. It became obvious our little boy would not flourish at school, he just wanted to stay with his mum. He had various sensory issues and did not enjoy the toddler groups that his peers did.

We discovered home educating as an option by accident. At the time there was a small public toddler group run by home educators, which was very helpful to meet local home-educating families and ask questions.

Our son had learnt to recognise letters and sounds with no effort around age 3 after he discovered an online resource that I had been looking at. So we figured he would be reading fairly soon as he had such an interest in stories and could recognise the letters and knew the sounds. He was not interested in any other materials for learning letters, or writing.

My husband was unsure about home educating, particularly into secondary years. So we decided to delay school and keep reviewing the situation. I chose to give up my career as a scientific consultant to stay home and home educate our son so we became a single income family.

We were lucky to meet a local home educator with an older child at Cambridge University, with experience of HE in California & Cambridge.

We sought out evidence – books, research papers and went to conferences on home education.

Our son loved listening to stories, trips to feed the local ducks, play dates and had other interests such as weaving giant webs and tying knots with string all around the sitting room!

So we continued our days as before paying attention to my child, seeing what makes him light up and doing that. While providing other opportunities that might interest him.

What would have been the Primary School Years

Our approach:

I tried to continue to provide a fun, stimulating environment that followed his interests.

He would not engage with any resources aimed at teaching reading or writing.

So, we chose an unschooling approach. We did not differentiate between life and learning.

His first drawing that resembled anything other than a scribble was of a person at age 4 and a 1/2.

We followed local and national educational events eg Cambridge Festival of Science, Big Bang in London & Birmingham

We participated in the local HE community – one thing I learned was that if the in-person group you need is not around then, get together with a couple of other families and organise one!

Some HE groups were parent led, some had hired educators, or we tried some 'after

school' clubs eg Swimming, Woodcraft Folk.

I continued to read to him for hours and hours. When his capacity for listening to stories outgrew my ability to read, we added in audio books for him to listen to both sometimes with me and sometimes by himself while I took care of making dinner etc.

Our son was not reading and was not writing in primary years. But he would listen to stories for hours, and around age 9 he began to play Minecraft.

Family and Friends:

I learned that he learns through conversation and by diving deeply into passions. I would research resources/activities/places to visit that might go with the current interest or extend it or be a side shoot. I also strewed other interesting things about our home.

Some grandparents do get involved in HE to different levels of enthusiasm, ours definitely did not.

My mother-in-law was convinced we were ruining our son's life. She was worried, unsupportive and critical.

It was not an easy path to take.

So we actively sought out online and in-person HomeEd friends and acquaintances.

Learning happened without workbooks:

We saw our child flourishing despite not yet reading or meeting other key stage milestones.

I didn't need workbooks or written exercises to see that he was learning. Every interaction that I had with him showed me that he was developing.

Not reading was not an issue (he still learned, other children would read for him when needed. E.g. when visiting museums or other places. There was no shame or mention of it.

He had time to do the things he wanted. He had his childhood being a child.

What would have been the Secondary School Years

Our son began what would have been his Secondary Years – not reading, not writing much, not doing maths or any formal subjects.

If we had to fill in a form on his educational attainments, I am not sure what we would have written. 'Exceptionally good at Minecraft' or 'listening to stories', is probably not on the National Curriculum.

I continued to try and provide a full and stimulating environment – attending groups in Drama, Science, history, socialising with close friends. Family trips to castles, to science festivals or places of interest to him such as the wolf sanctuary when he developed a love of wolves. Along with plenty of home time and parents prepared to play Minecraft and to be tech support and learn to install Mods and program features with Redstone (Minecraft's electrical game mechanic). Looking up walkthroughs or recipes to make things or reading words for him as he needed it. I took him to any local gaming groups that popped up. He made a couple of new friends. He also discovered YouTube to watch videos for help he needed.

At one point, Dad thought they could build a gaming pc together. But actually that was not our son's interest so dad built it on his own for our son.

When our son did not like many of the home-ed groups that existed at the time I gathered a small group of friends and we started a drop in social group to expose ourselves to more people. The group became so popular and big that my son hated it!

So back to the drawing board and with a group of friends, we started a smaller closed group with aim of nourishing friendships for the children. This group also wasn't quite right for my son so I created a second group in a room next to the first one for the older children. That worked well until Covid hit.

He loved stories and had a huge vocabulary.

He learned to play chess and fold origami through YouTube.

At age 10 he still could not read. He became a bit frustrated and wanted to learn. We looked at some programs together especially for dyslexic children. It did not go well. He just could not crack the code for reading and became angry and upset. So we put the books away. He continued to game without reading.

But he did learn to read! Soon after his 11th birthday, he suddenly started reading and began writing more.

His stories had led him to an interest in ancient languages of Norse & Latin. So we supported him in learning about those. I have to say that Latin was easier to find resources to support him than Norse!

He decided to do more activities outside the home, e.g. archery, fencing, judo

We started to consider that he might not go the academic route and think about other options for his later education.

Shortly after 12 he announced he wanted to do GCSEs and go to sixth form college with the aim of going to university.

As with all his other interests we discussed it with him & supported him and adapted our days to allow for the new interest this time of formal study. Also using a study style that worked for his unusual learning style. It was a big change to our days. He needed me to sit with him and decode the text books and discuss the content with him. While he could read his learning style was still conversation.

He wanted Latin to be his first GCSE. We found a Classics undergraduate to help. He sat his Latin GCSE at the age of 14. He achieved a grade 9.

He quickly followed this with Ancient Greek, Physics, then Maths. He went on to get a total of 8 GCSEs: seven grade 9s and one Grade 8. We had discovered that 8 GCSEs were required to for him to attend the sixth form college that he wanted to go to. He studied many of these on extremely compressed time scales.

It turns out learning to read late had allowed him to develop the ability to focus intensely and ability to learn incredibly quickly.

At 16 and 1/2 he was at last ready & wanting to attend formal full time education. He is now at Hills Road Sixth Form College studying four A-levels and an EPQ.

In summary

Our aims when home educating were for our child:

To keep a life-long love of learning that all toddlers seem to have

To gain the skills required to live in our society and confidence to learn new skills as

needed

To have a childhood being a child without worrying about test scores or comparison to peers

And to be happy with who he chooses to be

We tried to provide an education through:

Paying close attention to our child. Helping him to do the things he wanted in a safe way.

By providing a rich & stimulating environment: exposure to people, places, games, things of interest. Listening and respecting when he did not like something.

Providing opportunities to build friendships

Modelling behaviour myself & discussing life experiences as they occurred e.g. I let my child watch me seeking help when I needed it, learning new skills myself and sometimes pushing myself outside my own comfort zone (such as running groups or talking here tonight or making friends with fellow parents to encourage him to make friends with fellow children). I only realised later how important this modelling aspect of his education was.

Talking. So much talking & discussion over the years.

I think that it was because of his home educating, not despite it, that he is where he is today.

I feel that had we done things differently and preserved with workbooks or trying to force him to read before he was ready, he would not have the skills and confidence that he does today.

Not every child suits school. Not every child will progress in the linear incremental way set out by the Key Stages.

I am so grateful we could take this path that suited our son so well

I hope that the parents here today, and the authorities, can continue to allow and enable children like our son to flourish.

Thank you!

Jennie: Home Ed Experience

Talk Transcript of Home Educator (in her own words): school refuser/SEN/

Introduction

Telling our story to represent a significant minority of home edders.

Background: 3rd generation teacher, school governor and hands-on parent.

Year 3

Young in year having been refused a deferral by people who had never met him, hated school despite loving to learn, clearly increasingly not coping.

Worked within system to try and address. Class teacher, SENCO etc Just got worse.

Finally, school refusal and breakdown, age 7. So severe our GP suggested brain tumour. Would only stay in school if physically restrained. Clearly not learning with such high anxiety and damaging to a growing brain.

Help

EHCP/ diagnosis etc would take 18 months and we'd been trying to find a private EP for a year already. After 2 restraints, took child out, initially off sick then off roll, in full discussion with the SENCO etc

Private diagnosis. HF autism. Later emerged abusive teacher. Spent about 100 hours private work getting him an EHCP. SENDIASS was brilliant at helping us understand the system.

Decided on 3 priorities

- First understanding and then restoring our child's mental and physical health
- Restoring his love of learning
- Getting him back to ARE in Maths and English.

We expected we would only home ed for a year but it has been almost 4. Slowly reintegrating into school because, for him, we believe that is a good solution.

We chose Home Ed because we couldn't see a way to meet the first 2 priorities in school. Mental health collapsed so fast, the system wasn't nimble enough to help, despite very concerned SENCO. We didn't want to decide between being fined or fighting with the EWO and restoring our child's faith in us to keep him safe and feeling safe. Even now, although entitled to unlimited hours with an EP on his EHCP to address his previous school trauma, he has only had 4 because the funding isn't there.

Home Ed has given us...

Time for his body to rest and recover and not force learning on days when he was almost catatonic.

Freedom to create a sensory environment where he could thrive

Freedom to follow his interests and lead him back to a love of learning

Freedom to give him a day of light schooling or none at all when he was genuinely unwell or physically unable to focus without fear of letters threatening me with prison

Freedom to enjoy readalouds while snuggling on the sofa, experiences like painting the underside of the dining room table when we learnt about Michelangelo, freedom to let him learn at his own pace without fear of failure

Freedom to ignore the national curriculum in many subjects where it is incredibly unengaging and to use it, e.g. in maths where I personally think it works pretty well

Freedom to exit a system that I do not believe as an education professional is in the interests of many children both in the area of curriculum and attendance policy despite incredibly hard-working and committed staff

Freedom to choose to move into the category of EOTAS when he was ready

Conclusion

Anyone who has seen our son in the last few years will tell you he is transformed. He is alert, healthy, confident. He knits his own socks. Bakes all our bread, is a valued volunteer at the local community garden and reads well above his age level. We hit our first 2 priorities. The 3rd may never be quite in his reach because his maths is just not that great, dispute a superb tutor but he will never feel bad for that under our care and has had time to find many things he is really, really good at.

We appreciate and respect those who choose to home ed very much and are different to many families who choose to home ed for similar reasons to us, but we think some of the obstacles we faced are very representative and we wanted to highlight them to you and encourage others who may be in a similar position. It's really hard but very much worth it.

Most of all, we want you to remember that families home ed, not because they don't care about their kids learning and futures but because they very much do.

A great 'THANK YOU!' to everyone that made this meeting as productive and useful as it was, with particular thanks to Jennie, Nancy-Ann and Kate.