

Cambridgeshire Home Educators

Positive Dialogue Forum



Minutes of the Meeting

Date: Wednesday 9 April 2025

Time: 4pm for 4.30pm start; finishing no later than 6.30pm

Venue: Children and Families Wing, Meadows Community Centre

Chair: Penny Stanbridge

Coordinator/minutes: Helen Murray

Zoom support: Nancy-Ann, Julie, Nicole, Kate and Joe

LA representatives: Luthfur Rahman (Education Legal Manager), Melanie Chandler (Children Missing From Education Officer) and Ross Bilimoria-Mears (Interim Statutory Assessment Team Strategic Manager)

Apologies: LA SEND representative and Natalie Stead, Team Manager for Disabled Children's Social Work Team

Introduction

This meeting follows on from the last meeting in November 2024 following the LA's request to move to annual in-person meetings so that meetings will now happen annually in Spring. Representatives from the LA SEND team were not present as hoped - due to staffing issues/empty posts and Natalie's leave conflicting with the meeting - so the agenda was adjusted accordingly. Penny opened the meeting, welcomed and introduced the people in the room, and handed over to Luthfur.

Luthfur Rahman, Education Legal Manager and Senior Elective Home Education Lead

Luthfur explained that his role is mainly looking after school attendance. He highlighted the DfE Working Together document, which came into force in August last year and encourages schools and LAs to work together to improve school attendance and ensuring everyone goes the extra mile before enforcements are considered. With regard to EHE, he is the named person responsible for EHE in Cambridgeshire (each LA must have one). He explained that Karen Beaton used to be in that role and is now in a more strategic role. Any EHE queries she gets, she passes to him. He said Karen and he still work closely together as part of a small team, which has got smaller recently due to someone sadly passing away and leaving them a team member down. It is hard to recruit a new person for the post but they have managed continued with the help of their colleague, Donna Symonds, and business support administrators. Referencing how busy they are, he highlighted that their Appeals Officer and the business support officers have 250 school admission appeals to process and this involves working alongside an independent panel of recruited volunteers as well as LA administrators; it is a very lengthy process providing appropriate support to parents exercising their right to appeal. This may be relevant to some who find themselves home educating as an interim measure while looking for a school place.

Mel explained that she is one of three Children Missing in Education Officers tracking those children who are not registered at school or as home educated, often working from school referrals or with children who have come into the area from elsewhere. When working with home educators, it's often in cases where the family has fallen out with a school: to discuss their options,

signpost and make sure they understand what elective home education (EHE) is. They may also be involved if it looks like a family haven't engaged because communications have gone astray and they may ask for a report or clarification. Luthfur clarified that there are also Improvement Officers who may also contact families to offer support e.g. if the description of the education taking place seems a bit thin, rather than send a letter saying its insufficient, the LA find it's better to recognise that it's a hard task for some people so we would seek to provide support in the first instance. A participant on Zoom asked about the relationship between elected officials and the LA officials; Luthfur explained that this is a route that complaints may often filter down to them via elected officials via the Education Feedback Team.

Ross Bilimoria-Mears, Interim Statutory Assessment Team Strategic Manager, EHCPs for children who are EHE.

Ross explained his role as head of assessment team and responsibility for coordination of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). He gave apologies for not being there in person as his presence was required elsewhere earlier in the day which meant he couldn't get to the venue in time. He started by explaining section 19 provision, which relates to children without EHCPs and may be relevant to those considering EHE or school.

Ross explained that Section 19 places a duty on LAs for statutory school age children who can't attend school because of illness, exclusion or other reason (so not specifically home to do with home education); an example would be a child permanently excluded from a school which would mean the LA would need to put something in place by day 6 (or day 1 if child is in care). This is not a long term solution – it is an interim provision to ensure there is education provision until reintegration to a school can be arranged. Ross

explained the LA has a range of quality-assured providers for this and that it can be complex in Cambridgeshire because of an arrangement whereby funding is devolved to secondary schools but the LA still has oversight. He explained there are two key teams to know about: the District SEND team at primary level and the Education Inclusion Team at secondary level. Ross went on to explain that the EHCP is a legal document which describes SEND, support needed and desired outcomes. He explained it is a big process to get an EHCP in place. In terms of EHE, the LA no longer has a legal duty to secure EHCP provision. If a child isn't electively home educated, the LA has to make sure they are in school or have appropriate provision. Section F of that document details what needs to be provided. When a child becomes EHE the LA no longer has that duty but does still need to ensure an annual review of that plan happens. The provision then rests with the parents. Similarly, securing examinations for children is for parents/carers.

An application for a needs assessment can be requested; if a child is in school a parent or carer can ask for that, and this is still the case if the child is home educated. Ross pointed out that there is a lot of terminology and acronyms but also lots of helpful websites to support parents to understand it all. He said to think of an EHCP as an end product that is reviewed on an ongoing basis. The needs assessment happens first to determine if they require an EHCP. It's supposed to be a 20 week process but nationally there are delays due to huge increase in demands. An EHCP requires input from professionals such as an educational psychologist and a wide range of views needs to be gathered. He recognises that a lot has changed in the last decade and needs are very different now and the Government knows it and recognises that the SEND system is broken. Ross said that there are papers that show there will be movement on this and he hopes that consideration for EHE will be brought into it. He said that in his, and indeed most people's,

view, a lot needs to change and at the moment all we can do is operate within the existing law.

Moving on to speak about EOTAS, Ross said this can get really easily misunderstood. Education other than at school – this would be a situation where a child has an EHCP but it would not be appropriate for that child to go to any setting for any length of time – all needs can't be met in a school. Only when we've exhausted all the types of settings, and have evidence of this, would the case be heard by a panel to determine if the child should have an EOTAS package. At this point, it's clear school is not appropriate. Helen raised a question sent in earlier in the day from a parent who feels strongly that EHE families who would welcome it, should be supported to access ECHP and EOTAS in cases where school is clearly not appropriate but whose needs do not necessarily warrant a specialist school. Ross said they would need to be satisfied that there is an appropriate setting and is hopeful that it will be possible to expand provision to fill this sort of gap by expanding Enhanced Resource Bases (a strong model that is a specialist setting on the site of a mainstream school, with separate admissions process, specially resourced to support a child to access it and be supported in as many mainstream lessons as appropriate and build up).

A participant raised a question about what constitutes evidence in the context of an EHCP. Ross said evidence may take different forms and that EHCP reflects the needs and provision accurately based on evidence and reports so a huge part of it is the evidence gathering through discussions with schools and settings, looking at what's in the plan and if they feel they can meet those needs. It's largely about consultation feeding into decision-making and a wide range of settings can contribute. Asked by a participant if he is on the panel,

he said yes, although it's not always necessarily him per se but definitely would be looked at within the inclusion part of the Education Directorate.

Soizic Le Courtois (University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education), Researching the importance of play in learning

Soizic explained that she joined PEDAL (<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/pedal/>) in 2017 and that she and other researchers there were interested in finding out about the role of play in schools and learning in general. Soizic makes clear her own research was in schools and that she was a primary school teacher herself but very much considers herself a friend to the home education community. She went on to explain how her work is relevant to home educating families. For example, her research looked at self-determination theory, which is about different types of motivation internal and external – not just intrinsic/extrinsic. She spoke of the importance when learning in feeling you have ownership, or you really feel strongly that something matters, being very different from motivation imposed on you – e.g. parent/authority/pressure - and that motivation from within leads to better outcomes. Soizic spoke about needs that need to be met such as autonomy, competency and relatedness (positive relationships), feeling you're able to do things and that you own your actions. She said these seemed to be the most pressing issues – her team were also interested in self-regulation and learning and they came up with a model of how these things interact. At this point, Soizic shared a video illustrating this thinking around agency and learning: <https://youtu.be/MC9YgP7HgCE>

Soizic went onto explain how she and her team looked at the literature and pedagogy and considered what would support agency and autonomy in

learning and teacher training, and found lots of strategies and principles and practices that teachers might use which could be divided into different areas; participation, meaningful context, sharing power and responsibility, adults modelling (e.g. asking questions/making mistakes) and following children's interests and preferences. She signposted a website where these resources can be accessed for free:

www.playful-learning.org

Soizic went on to describe how, when they worked with teachers trying to increase autonomy/ownership, they found there is not a lot of room for it and it became very obvious there were a lot of control mechanisms in schools and those things conflicted with trying to give ownership. This would show up, for example, as tension between times when teachers want children to show initiative, and times when teachers very much do not want this. A lot of those functions didn't come from the teachers; overall they believed in giving children ownership a great deal but it was really difficult in the environment they were in because of senior leadership expectations e.g. end of year 1 phonics screening. It was also the broader thinking which is very focused on getting children to a certain point. Soizic says she feels this is very relevant to home educators who are able to provide very different environments and there seems to be an awareness among home educating parents and that they feel the controlling environment of school is not a good fit for their children. She said that accountability of structures really matters and influences this thinking and how we choose to frame seeing what children do as being positive or negative. She said in schools she witnessed the idea of productivity as pervasive and tended not to take into account the value of process, that there was more focus on targets and arbitrary measures than on creating the right conditions to flourish, and how as society we would do well to be reminded of this and how problematic it can be to create environments where people can thrive in a system which is pressuring them

to get to a certain place.

Questions sent in advance by email for LA to address

Question 1

The LA have clarified that c. £8k per family that would be allocated for a school place is simply taken up by another child. Would it not make sense to channel some of this funding into providing better support for home educating families in cases where it is invited?

LA response: Reminder that when parents opt to home educate, parliament says they are accepting that responsibility and cost. Once a child is off roll (unless there are specific circumstances when this would be supported by EHCP), support can also be discretionary where possible and is not always directly via our department.

Participant responses: In the Zoom chat, participants felt there really should be some allocation of funds to things like exams – this was returned to at the end of the meeting – see Any Other Business

Question 2

The LA have indicated that they take a broad view on what constitutes a suitable education and recognise that what is suitable for one child may be entirely unsuitable for another. Can you further clarify what policies or training is in place to ensure new personnel are brought up to speed with the great diversity of approaches to providing a suitable education?

LA response: Luthfur reported that they have not recruited anyone in the last two years but when we do there is a thorough induction programme in place,

there is the county council compulsory induction programme and each dept has our own and we make sure individuals receive appropriate training regarding diversity, legislation relevant to the broad responsibilities of the team and draw on resources such as a webinar from Education Otherwise. Luthfur further reported that they do have people in the team from a wide range of backgrounds bringing different knowledge and experience, e.g. ex teachers, youth workers, ex-police. Regarding the EHE panel which looks at the online form or reports sent in by parents who are registered because they have deregistered from school or are voluntarily registered, Luthfur explained that he chairs the panel with his colleague Donna Symonds and they always also include Children Missing Education or Attendance Officer in the panel to draw on their knowledge and experience too. Mel shared that she has been on the panel and previously worked in a special school so has experience in SEND.

Question 3

The LA has agreed that we can have Cambridge Home Educating Families (CHEF) cards (without the LA's logo and with links to the CHEF and DfE websites) that will be distributed at the annual meetings and can be used to encourage local businesses etc to provide educational discounts/access etc. Would you also be happy to provide a one-off open letter of support encouraging local businesses to recognise CHEF and the card?

LA response: While happy for us to carry them and understand how they could be useful, they are unable to be seen to be endorsing it. As a letter of support is not possible so we may need to do some work on this as a community ourselves.

Question 4

If the CWS Bill goes through in its current form, does the LA envisage themselves continuing their “light touch” approach? Or will they be actively seeking to use as many powers as the Bill gives them to inspect homes and serve School Attendance Orders?

LA response: Luthfur explained that until the bill goes through, they obviously can't fully answer this until decisions are made. He acknowledged it's a slow, frustrating process. He stated that if the government decides to change the law about rights of home education or about enforcement actions, that comes from the parliament, and the LA would have no other options. Equally, if the parliament tells the LA that they should be supporting home educators more, then they would certainly be reviewing policies and procedures to make sure that happens.

Luthfur observed that our LA does try to maintain a light-touch approach and that he's aware other LAs can be perceived as quite threatening and that he hopes our LA is not. He says they will use legal tools in cases where it seems education is not happening if they absolutely have to, but do all they can to not make it onerous for parents to avoid it reaching that stage (e.g. giving 15 day intervals for responses). He says they do get extremes in reporting from a few lines to tens of pages and they do prefer parents to use the online form as it makes it more efficient to process.

He says he hopes the bill won't make it any more onerous for home educators and that they will work with the government on their changes but equally feels it would be useful to have a dialogue between the LA and home education community to discuss how to work together and make those changes work for everyone. There is the law and recommendations we are obliged to work with from Parliament but the LA would want to engage with home educators about them. He shared that they too, as a small team, are

anxious about it and how they would go about registering everybody if that's what they were tasked with, citing around 1,500 EHE children currently with that figure changing all the time.

He explains that currently there is now law around how qualified LA personnel have to be about the programmes of education parents describe in their reports just as there is not law stating that parents must follow the national curriculum so using qualified teachers to make those judgements would not make sense and instead they look at each case individually, recognising and respecting individuals' needs e.g. some are focussing on life skills right now but others might be focusing particularly on Maths and English (Luthfur shared how those subjects would be particularly important to him personally as a parent). He clarified that they welcome different shapes and forms of education and described how they get some wonderfully detailed and illustrated reports, while others are very minimal – he explained how some challenge them and there can be misconceptions and misunderstandings and said he wanted to make the point that the LA is genuinely interested, they don't go knocking on doors demanding information like other LAs do and we only want to step in and help if help is needed.

Question 5

At the last planning meeting Karen Beaton suggested more regular online opportunities to engage with Cambridgeshire home educators; can we discuss what that could look like?

LA response: Luthfur reported that he and Karen are very happy to have planning meetings with Helen (meeting coordinator) and Penny (Chair) to prepare for the face to face meetings as frequently as necessary and reported that they had found the most recent planning meeting very helpful and said to let us know when we would like another. He expressed their

preferences for using Teams for the meetings. Helen queried if they could also consider some MP surgery style Teams meetings in between the face to face meetings with other parents and Luthfur said he would take the suggestion back and that they are happy to engage and support the community. He spoke of his experience with other LAs who take a very different 'them and us' tone with EHE parents and observed how, in contrast, Cambs LA have always gone the extra mile for EHE and he sees much better engagement here, stating that it's important and needs to happen. He spoke of how in previous meetings the possibility of going completely online had been discussed but they are happy to continue with the newer face to face/hybrid model with people also being able to participate online to maximise engagement.

Additional question from a participant

A participant asked "Can I ask if the LA has received anything from central government about targets for getting home educated children back to school after the CWS bill (probably) comes in? I have done an FOI for this but no response as yet."

LA response: Luthfur said he had not heard of any as yet but if they were given any then they would have to work towards what they are asked to by the Government. He said the LA would be happy, where there is flexibility, to work with families and support them in the best ways possible

News and updates from the LA

Luthfur reported that there were no updates but said please please do check the website; it's not changed very frequently but there's lots of information on there (the CHEF website is signposted too), especially for new home

educators. It covers roles, rights and responsibilities; how the LA can support; details of the library offer; flexischooling; exams and SEND. It also says if there are cases where families feel they have been pushed into EHE when they don't want to be, to please let them know so they can assist.

Luthfur reported that they have had a very positive Ofsted inspection around their EHE offer and the only thing they picked up on was the length of time (28 days) for parents to provide information when they choose to home educate so they are considering reducing this but also have to be mindful of how much they can manage.

Luthfur reported that he had been approached by Grafham Water (<https://anglianwaterparks.co.uk/grafham-water>) who are keen to engage with EHE families and learn about things they might be able to offer them in terms of outdoor education. Details to be circulated.

Home educating parent case study; Joe Ogborn – sharing our experiences on our home educating journey

Joe explained that he and his wife are adoptive parents prioritising attachment/connection with their children, which contributed to their decision to home educate. He shared that his wife works full time and he home educates full time. He used pseudonyms and blurred pictures on slides to protect his daughters' privacy and explained that one is 6 and eldest is 7 and that the latter has some additional needs, primarily using makaton, sounds, a few words and signs to communicate. He spoke of how they are seeing her ability to communicate grow. He said they believe their 7 year old is neurodivergent and said that they find life goes better when they assume she has PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance) but said he, like many others

much prefer reframing this as 'Positive Drive for Autonomy' which more accurately describes her very real need for freedom from mind and from control by others, explaining how PDA means that she experiences everyday demands as threats to her autonomy. He shared how in the beginning their decision was about attachment in their newly-formed family and that home education enabled them to invest heavily in that, but said that since then other priorities have emerged which are more easily achieved outside of a school environment e.g. prioritising skills for independent living, character over knowledge and self-directed learning. Early on it was clear their older child may not reach independent living by age 18 so they wanted to maximise her opportunities to practise – this has led to her involvement in things like shopping, money management and cooking – all solid lifeskills for later life – skills that for her, will have a significant impact on her trajectory into adult life.

Joe went on to describe their approach to valuing character over knowledge, citing how character takes decades to form but knowledge is available at our fingertips faster than ever before. Things like critical thinking take much longer to acquire. He described a trip they took to Utah where they spent two and half weeks in the canyons on e-bikes, and how when he pointed out igneous/metamorphic rocks etc, his wife didn't know much about them. This caused him to reflect that if she happened to have tuned out of that part of her schooled experience of Geography, it had no bearing on her ability to successfully do her current job, which has been much more dependent on her character and has developed into a very technical and skilled role.

He said what was most important to them was self-directed learning and he explained how this has largely come from his experience of working for a small company who have seen incredible success through a music mentoring programme engaging with young people because of their application of self-determination theory (he and the room recognised here this was something

Soizic, the earlier speaker, had also spoken of and valued). He said in this company he saw the fostering of intrinsic motivation embedded in their practices, thereby creating an environment in which the big needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness could be met. He said in this setting, he saw remarkable results and when he reflected on these things, felt he and his wife could meet these needs in their own children through self-directed learning via home education. He highlighted how self-directed learning is of course what all children are doing before school - with parents supporting their interests - and how self-directed learning simply allows that continue into the school years. Referencing PDA, he spoke of how it renders traditional teaching techniques pointless but self-directed learning permits his daughter to learn in a low-demand setting and so she is flourishing. He describes how play is an active part of his daughters' lives and how much they are learning about the world in which they live through play. He spoke of how just having a world map on the wall has led to a huge amount of play, discussion and learning as an example of this - several home educating parents in the room smiled and nodded in agreement.

Joe continued that in relation to learning to read, traditional routes didn't work for his children so instead he gave trust and autonomy and it just happened – perhaps a little later than would be expected at school. He shared a slide (will be made available alongside the minutes) showing the first book one of his daughters read independently – one he had read to her many times before she decided to learn to read it herself. He spoke of how traditional assessment might not successfully demonstrate her reading ability but that she definitely is reading.

Speaking of competence, Joe described their learning journey with telling the time, and how he bought several clocks until he landed upon a clock that

brought telling the time into their competency (one which clearly shows the minutes between the numbers) which helped it to click. He said it helped him realise that his children want to learn and his job is to scaffold so it's easy for them to learn. He explained how he worked really hard to build a social network around friends and community and keeping in touch with their friends who went onto school. He explains that while their older child's needs were the initial catalyst, it's now just one among many – it's a way of life and has provided a context for maximising time together. He acknowledged that they were fortunate that it was a genuine option for them and not at all one they felt forced into. He says home education allows the whole family to flourish and finished by sharing a poem he'd written reflecting on what he's learned and how he sees his children:

You are not marble,
or wood,
or clay
waiting to be sculpted, cut and shaped.

It is not for me
to take away or add to you,
to make of you what I will.

Instead, I will wait
and watch
as you slowly unfold,
revealing yourself to me.

You are a garden –
some flowers in full bloom,
some seeds still hidden
beneath the soil,
awaiting the first warmth of Spring.

Any Other Business

Last questions arose for speakers; a participant asked if Soizic/PEDAL are interested in researching EHE; Soizic responded not PEDAL generally but certainly her personally.

Penny thanks speakers for creating this opportunity for people to connect with them. A participant expressed thanks to Luthfur stating 'you're a great rep, very proactive and welcoming'.

Participants wanted it noted that while they understood the c. £8k forfeited if a school place is not taken up, it would be very much appreciated if it were possible to make the case to reallocate some of that for mandated exams at least. Luthfur explained that the money resides with the school so the LA can't access it and that as soon as a child is off roll, a school is no longer obliged to provide any support (even though some do e.g. child can come in and use library or use school as an exam centre). He advised that in cases where EHE children were at school previously it's worth talking to the previous school, even if you've fallen out with them. He explained that historically the LA has supported EHE parents where they could, even when funds have been limited, as Karen was passionate about working with parents but it's very much a year on year budget issue so not possible to promise it on an ongoing basis or in all cases. He said in the current climate, it's difficult and they don't know what's coming with tariffs but they are always open to supporting if they can. Asked what the process would be for accessing it if/when available, he said the child must be registered with the LA and Penny clarified this is for a certain period (18 months) and there are strict criteria so that it's fair. Luthfur said he would send relevant links via Helen and said that if funding is available then the LA pay up to £300 towards fees parents have have paid for exams.

Participants also wanted to know what had happened to reminders about vaccinations, which LA website says EHE families will receive. Not all of us are getting them, so Luthfur was asked to check if it's still possible or ask for it to be removed if it no longer. He agreed to take back to the team to check.

A question was then raised about LA roles and that of general case workers. Luthfur clarified that there are district teams and now a Senior Transition Advisor for post-16 advice on applying to college etc. Mel said if she's

supporting e.g. a year 11 child, she would be in a referral for STA and thinks families can also do this themselves by contacting the district team.

Participants also thanked the meeting organisers and contributors and said they'd love to hear more stories like Joe's perhaps in addition to the stories shared at the positive dialogue meetings (perhaps as separate meetings or case studies shared on the website to improve access/inclusion). Others volunteered to help out with admin at the next meeting.

Earlier in the day before the start of the meeting, a member of the community shared the idea of starting a "bring and swap books" library at the Meadows, which in fact already exists in the cafe area and home educators are welcomed by the centre to use and contribute to it. Helen forgot to share it at the meeting (apologies) so is sharing it in the minutes here instead to remind people it's a great resource.

Date of Next Meeting

The date and time for the next meeting was agreed as 4 for 4.30-6.30pm on 15 April 2026. Helen to confirm date and time for next meeting to Luthfur who will book room.

Penny closed the meeting by thanking everyone from the LA and the parents in the community for their contributions and reminded everyone that the new CHEF cards would be made available via parent volunteers at regular home education venues in the coming weeks. Helen to circulate details on this.

ACTIONS POINTS

- Helen: Circulate details on new CHEF cards
- Someone in home ed community: Draft a letter to raise awareness and encourage local businesses to provide educational discounts/access for families with a CHEF card (to volunteer please email hellofromchef@gmail.com)
- All in home ed community who are registered: note the LA prefer us to use the online reporting form for annual reports if possible but also happy to accept other formats

- All in home ed community: Look out for details on what Grafham Water can offer to EHE children (Luthfur to share details via Helen)
- Luthfur: Please send relevant links via Helen regards financial support eg. For funding exams
- Luthfur: Please check with team and confirm whether vaccination booking reminders can be sent, or update website if this is no longer possible. (Would email reminders suffice?)
- Luthfur: Please come back to us regarding online meetings (both planning and for parents) and consider circulating information about Positive Dialogue meetings to your known EHE families.
- Luthfur: Please book the meeting room for 15 April meeting.
- Helen: Circulate minutes and date of next meeting (and thank you to Bronwen for proof-reading the minutes!)
- Anyone in the community: email hellofromchef@gmail.com to volunteer to help out with admin for the next meeting or to share your home ed story.