

HOME EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

Parents' experiences of home education

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¹ <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/>

² <https://www.seslip.co.uk/>

³ www.port.ac.uk/eric

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a small mixed-methods study exploring the experiences of parents⁴ who electively home educated (EHE) their children throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. It examined why parents chose to home educate, their experiences of home education, and, for parents whose children have returned to school, their experiences of transitioning their children back into formal education. Throughout the project, the focus was on the roles that local authorities and schools played throughout each phase of the home education journey.

The findings presented in this report are based on the responses of 114 parents to an online questionnaire and data from follow-up interviews with 13 questionnaire respondents.

Key findings

1. Although parents reported multiple reasons for choosing to home educate, 77% reported concerns about their child's mental health as a driver in their decision. Parents cited social anxiety or school-induced anxiety, the suitability of and/or dissatisfaction with the school environment, and concerns about its mental health support provision as reasons for deregistering their child. Some parents felt that the lack of school-based provision for mental health left them with no option but to home educate.
2. National lockdown periods gave parents who were considering EHE the opportunity to trial it – and most of them had continued with it following the full reopening of schools. Some parents, however, indicated an intention to enrol their child back into school at some point in the future.
3. On balance, parents found their interactions with local authorities (LAs) much more helpful than those they had with schools. Positive LA interactions were characterised by supportiveness and showing an understanding of parents' decision to home educate. Negative interactions were characterised by a lack of understanding or acceptance of parents' decision.
4. Some parents described experiencing a lack of empathy shown by some LAs and schools over their decision to choose EHE over school. Even among those who experienced positive interactions with their LAs, parents suggested that LAs needed to work on building and sustaining positive, non-judgemental and respectful relationships with the EHE community.

⁴ Although we refer to participants as 'parents', we are actually referring to any primary caregivers involved in the provision of home education.

Key recommendations

1. More research is needed at the local level to understand the relationship between parents' concerns for their child's mental health and their decision to home educate.
2. With a possible upcoming rise in the number of children returning to school after EHE, LAs may want to identify what schools are doing well regarding the transition from EHE and share practice locally.
3. LA EHE teams could create opportunities to share experience and best practice in order to improve positive relationship building with the EHE community.

Introduction

For parents and carers (hereon, parents) in England, the decision to register a child as home educated is voluntary, but this presents challenges for LAs. Without a compulsory register of children's whereabouts, it is hard for LAs to get an accurate picture of where children are being educated (e.g. in a school or at home). It also means that LAs have only partial insight into parents' reasons for wanting to remove their children from school. Consequently, this means that LAs might find it challenging to ensure that children who have been deregistered from school are receiving a suitable education⁵.

The reported increase in the number of children being home educated in England as a consequence of the pandemic⁶ means it is imperative that LAs develop a better understanding of why families make the decision to home educate, how these families experience home education, and what they believe schools and LAs could do to support them in providing a suitable education for their children.

This report presents the findings from a study of the recent experiences of home educating parents from eight LAs across the South East of England. The study had three aims. Firstly, to investigate why parents chose to home educate, and the factors involved in and the circumstances surrounding that decision. Secondly, to explore families' experiences of moving into home education from school, including what went well and what could have been better. Thirdly, for parents whose children had recently returned to school, the study investigated their experiences of the transition back into formal education. A central focus of this investigation was on parents' interactions with schools and LAs during the home education journey.

The study combined numerical data from a questionnaire about parents' home educating experiences, with rich, detailed data from follow up interviews with parents who responded to the questionnaire.

This report begins with background information about the home education landscape within England. It then details the methods used to conduct the research, and information about the sample, before presenting the study's main findings. It concludes with some practical recommendations.

⁵ de Souza, R. (2022). *Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/cco-where-are-englands-children-interim-findings-mar-2022.pdf>

⁶ Education Select Committee. (2021). *Strengthening Home Education*. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmeduc/84/8402.htm>

Background: The ADCS survey of elective home education

Since 2016, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has conducted an annual elective home education (EHE) survey⁷ to provide insight into the number and characteristics of children who are known to be home educated, and the reasons behind families' decisions to home educate. The ADCS use the survey data to determine what resources LAs use to support home educating families.

Whilst the ADCS EHE survey usefully provides broad data on the national picture of home education in England, it relies on information reported by LA EHE teams, rather than directly from EHE families. Hence, the results primarily reflect LAs' perspectives of the home education landscape, rather than the first-hand experiences of home educating families.

The most recent ADCS surveys have been conducted against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet while the survey for the 2020/21 academic year estimated a 34% increase in the number of families opting to home educate their children on the previous year, the reasons behind this were not wholly connected to Covid. LAs reported a marked increase in the number of parents citing general health or emotional health issues as reasons for deciding to home educate their children. LAs also suggested that anxiety and other mental health needs were more common drivers in parents' decision-making. However, there is currently little evidence about *why* children's general, emotional and mental health needs lead parents to remove their child from school and home educate.

There is also a lack of evidence in terms of the type of advice and guidance that home educating parents seek and/or are offered by LAs to support their home education journey. The 2020/21 ADCS survey asked LAs to provide information about the methods for providing support to EHE families; for example, via video call, telephone call, or face to face meetings. It did not detail the nature of the support provided or the extent to which it was matched with families' needs.

The latest ADCS survey report highlights that the government stipulates that LAs are responsible for ensuring that children receive a suitable education. Yet LAs do not have the power to be directly involved in the types of education that EHE children receive. Nevertheless, making sure that EHE parents have access to high-quality advice and guidance about home education is one step towards helping parents feel equipped to provide a suitable education for their child. As such, it is important not only for LAs to gain a deeper understanding of why

⁷ Association of Directors of Children's Services. (2021). Elective Home Education Survey Report. <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-report-2021>

parents choose to home educate their children in the first place, but also to build LAs' awareness about the advice and guidance parents think LAs ought to provide in order to prepare families for their home education journeys.

Research procedure and sample

This study used a mixed-methods approach. A questionnaire was sent to home educating parents across eight LA areas in the South East of England. Follow up interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of participants who completed the questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary. Parents were recruited via an expression of interest (EOI) email sent out by participating LAs on behalf of the ERIC research team. Around 5,000 EOI emails were sent to parents who started home educating during or after September 2019 (i.e. shortly before or during the pandemic). A total of 114 parents completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 2%.

We wanted to ensure the study represented a wide range of home education experiences. In particular, given the finding from the ADCS report on the rise in mental health concerns contributing to parents' decisions to home educate, we were interested in the experiences of parents who had a formally diagnosed mental health condition and/or whose child had a formally diagnosed mental health condition. As can be seen in Table 1, which shows the questionnaire respondents by key background characteristics, around one in five parents and one in four children in the questionnaire sample had a formally diagnosed mental health condition, although only two-thirds in each group reported receiving formal medical support for their condition.

We also wanted to include families whose voices tend to be underrepresented in research on EHE. To this end, we asked participants to indicate whether their child was or had once been looked after/in care, and whether they and/or their child had entered the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker. However, these criteria attracted an insufficient number of responses.

Table 1. Questionnaire respondents by key background characteristics

Characteristic	n	%
From a background other than White British	20	18%
Child has an Education, Health and Care Plan	7	6%
Child entitled to free school meals whilst at school	36	32%
Parent formally diagnosed with a mental health condition	21	18%
Child formally diagnosed with a mental health condition	29	25%
Parent receiving formal medical support for a mental health condition	14	12%
Child receiving formal medical support for a mental health condition	20	18%

The questionnaire asked parents about: 1) reasons for deciding to home educate; 2) the process of transitioning from school into home education; 3) general experience with home education; and 4) where applicable, the process of transitioning back into school after a period of home education. The questionnaire was designed to obtain broad insights into parents' perspectives about the extent and nature of the contact they had with schools and the LA during their home education journey. A copy of the questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were given the option to express interest in taking part in a follow up interview. The aim of the interviews was to obtain a richer and more contextual insight into parents' experiences with home education. In total, 10 parents took part in one to one interviews and three parents took part in a focus group interview.

Of the parents who took part in interviews, one was from a background other than white British. One parent had a child with an EHCP. Four parents had a child with a formally diagnosed mental health condition (although only one child was receiving medical support for their condition at the time of the research). Two parents reported having a diagnosed mental health condition. Three parents had a child who was entitled to free school meals. Four parents were from families who did not fit into any of these criteria.

The interview schedule covered the four themes used to organise the questionnaire (see above). A copy of the interview schedule can be seen in Appendix 2. All interviews took place on Zoom or over the telephone and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom facilities. The transcripts were then checked and amended for accuracy against the original audio recordings. The interview data were analysed thematically, using the interview schedule framework.

We note that the self-selecting nature of this study means that it is not possible to know how representative the parents who took part are of the general EHE population across the South East of England. We also stress that the findings from our interviews need to be interpreted with caution, due to the fact that many parents who took part (60%) came from backgrounds that might face additional challenges regarding undertaking EHE (e.g. they are on a low-income; they/their child has a mental health condition and/or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)).

In the presentation of findings that follows, numerical results from the closed ended questionnaire questions are presented as frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data from the open ended (free text) questionnaire questions and data from the interviews are presented thematically, with indicative or illustrative responses from parents.

Findings

1. Parents' motivations for and circumstances leading to EHE

While the reasons why parents decide to home educate their child are complex, in many cases, concerns about their child's mental wellbeing are a driving factor. For some, the partial school closures in place during the pandemic provided the opportunity and impetus for parents who were considering home education to continue once schools fully reopened.

Mental health concerns are a factor in the decision to home educate

Parents were asked to identify the reasons for choosing to home educate their child from a predefined list of options, based on equivalent items from the ADCS 2020/21 survey. Parents could select more than one reason. The results, presented in Table 2, show that 77% of parents reported concerns about their child's mental health as a reason for pursuing home education. This is in line with the results from the ADCS 2020/21 survey.

Table 2. Parents' reasons for deciding to home educate

Reasons for choosing home education	n	%
Concerns about my child's mental/emotional health	88	77%
I was generally dissatisfied with my child's school	55	48%
I was dissatisfied with how my child's school handled bullying	34	30%
Concerns about my child's physical health	31	27%
I was dissatisfied with the SEND provision offered at my child's school	29	25%
Home educating was a philosophical/lifestyle choice	26	23%
Home educating was a way to prevent legal action	11	10%
Concerns about my child's health specifically related to Covid-19	8	7%
My child's school suggested home education as an option	8	7%
My child did not get a place at preferred school	5	4%
I had difficulty in accessing a school place for my child	5	4%
Home educating was a way of avoiding school exclusion	4	4%
Other	14	12%

When asked to provide further information about their motivations for deciding to home educate, several parents specifically said their child experienced social or school-related anxiety and some expressed concerns with how their child's school handled matters relating to mental health needs. For instance, parents described schools' provision for children with SEND and/or social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) as 'inadequate'.

"School offered zero SEN support, I gave them medical evidence that they chose to ignore." (questionnaire)

"The autistic provision was inadequate and the communication from the staff was awful." (questionnaire)

"The school had a negative approach to my son and wrote off his needs." (questionnaire)

Just under half of parents (48%) reported that the decision to home educate was informed by some degree of dissatisfaction with their child's school, and it not providing the right environment to cater to their needs at that point in their education. A quarter of parents reported specific dissatisfaction with the school's SEND provision.

"My child struggled with different things at school, the school were great but there is only so much a school or teacher can do with limited resources and 29 other children to think about." (questionnaire)

"My daughter struggles being around lots of people, the school environment was not right for her." (questionnaire)

Other key factors influencing parents' decision-making included specific concerns with how the school handled bullying (30%), and concerns about their child's physical health (27%).

The pandemic effect

Only 7% of respondents cited concerns relating to Covid-19 as a reason for taking their child out of school, implying that for the majority of parents, the pandemic was not a primary factor in their decision to home educate. Just under a quarter of parents (23%) said that their decision was a philosophical/lifestyle choice. The evidence from the interviews suggests that the periods of partial school closure during lockdown had provided parents who were intending to home educate the opportunity and impetus to begin and continue, once schools fully reopened.

"I found that it was because of Covid that we started doing home education and many families I have spoken to have found the same - Covid gave them that push to start."

You know, they were unhappy and unsatisfied with what their children were getting at school. The forced lockdown gave them that nudge." (interview)

"It just prompted what was heading our way anyway. We were going to start home educating before Covid but then [child] wanted to try senior school so he stayed in the system... but then Covid hit." (interview)

"We made our decision just before Covid, but if we hadn't, Covid would have been the thing to push us towards that decision." (interview)

Multifaceted reasoning

Analysis of the response to open ended questionnaire items and the interview data revealed that in many cases, the reasons why parents decided to take their child out of school were not straightforward. The cumulation of multiple, mostly school-related, factors fed into parents' decision to home educate their child.

"[Child] is autistic. They went to a grammar school. They weren't so good with the pastoral side... They then started to experience very severe anxiety... it got to the point where they were considering [severe self-harm] in order not to attend [school]... we asked for a reduced timetable and we asked for some reasonable adjustments. I quoted the SEND Code of Practice and it was all refused. It got to the point where it felt so toxic and dangerous to keep sending them to school." (interview)

"[Child] was so deep in burnout and depression and all the school could do at that time was pile on the pressure about their attendance, but they put nothing in place. They kept saying about referrals but no referrals were ever made." (interview)

'Left with no choice'

The interview data revealed that for some parents, particularly those whose child had SEND and/or SEMH, stressed that home education did not feel like a choice for them, but rather their only option. Several felt that they had exhausted all other options and the move to home education was 'a final resort'.

"I never chose home education and I can't stress that more strongly. It was a need at the time and we were forced by the school... I either had a nervous breakdown, [child] had a nervous breakdown, or we would be fined £1000 or even a jail term. None of that was going to happen. None of that was viable. So, what other option was there? Our hand was forced." (interview)

"This is not a decision we made for philosophical reasons. I did not want to home educate any of my children at any point." (interview)

"It really was, what do we do? There's no school, there's no help, there's nothing. We weren't forced but our backs were pushed up to the wall as much as they could have been." (interview)

Discussing the decision to home educate

The questionnaire asked parents to indicate if they had discussed their decision to home educate with anybody else, and if so, with whom. Over half (57%) had discussed it with friends and family, and 38% had discussed it with members of the home educating community. Just over a fifth (21%) of parents discussed the decision with their LA, and 25% of parents with their child's school.

The relatively low proportion of parents who had spoken with the school may be indicative of a general sense of their overall dissatisfaction with the school, which fuelled their decision to deregister their child. Equally, these results may reflect the possibility that parents are more likely to discuss their decision with those more in support of home education.

2. Helpful interactions with LAs and schools during the EHE journey

This study was concerned with parents' experiences of on-going interactions with LAs and schools, following the decision to home educate. We were specifically interested in the transition from school to EHE and (where applicable) from EHE back into school, as well as EHE itself. Helpful interactions with LAs and schools were characterised by supportiveness and showing an understanding of parents' decisions.

Helpful interactions with the LA

Questionnaires showed that 26% of parents rated their LA as either 'helpful' or 'very helpful' during the transition phase from school to EHE. A further 38% of parents said that their LA was 'helpful', or 'very helpful' throughout the duration of their EHE experience.

During the EHE period, parents received advice and guidance from the LA through a range of methods, including signposting to websites and social media (34%) and home educating networks (25%). Around a third of parents received emails from the LA (33%) and/or telephone calls (30%), with 24% having face to face meetings.

When asked what was good about the advice and guidance they had received from the LA, many parents identified the supportive and non-judgemental approach of the EHE team. Parents valued not being made to feel as if they had made a poor decision to remove their child from school and begin home education. Parents appreciated LAs who took the time to explain how they would check that their child was receiving an appropriate education, and what type of evidence they would be looking for. Some parents spoke about being able to access timely advice via a named EHE officer.

"Video meeting was helpful in discussing what I was going to be doing with my son for the year. She [EHE officer] provided some useful information and what she would be looking for in a year's time. She allowed me to get on with my role as a parent trusting that I know my son better than anyone." (questionnaire)

One parent contrasted the support they received from the LA and the school.

"We were made to feel as if it were a mistake, as if it was the worst thing we could possibly do, that we didn't know what we were doing - the school was incredibly unsupportive... But, the local authority was actually incredibly helpful. I thought they were going to be very difficult. You know how you have this vision that they are going to be coming around and knocking on the door thinking you're in some kind of cult? It wasn't like that at all. They could not have been more supportive." (interview)

Helpful interactions with schools

Only 14 parents in our study (12% of all questionnaire respondents) reported having an experience of their child transitioning from EHE back into school. Many of these parents said that their interactions with the school regarding this process were positive. The school had been supportive, had helped their child to reintegrate into the classroom, and had held regular meetings with the parents to discuss the transition process. Where applicable, the school were mindful of the child's SEND/SEMH needs, taking these into account and making reasonable adjustments.

"We had several meetings prior to starting school and the staff were very receptive to making adjustments to cater for my child's needs." (questionnaire)

"They took their time and transitioned my child in a helpful way by focusing on child's needs." (questionnaire)

It is worth noting that the questionnaire responses indicated that other parents were intending to enrol their child back into school in the future.

3. Unhelpful interactions with LAs and schools during the EHE journey

Compared with those who had helpful interactions with their LA, overall, slightly fewer parents described having unhelpful interactions with their LA during their EHE journey. However, parents' interactions with schools were largely negative, and characterised by a lack of understanding or acceptance of parents' decision to home educate.

Unhelpful interactions with the LA

Overall, slightly fewer parents described having unhelpful interactions with LAs during their EHE journey, than having helpful interactions. Questionnaire responses showed 27% of parents said that the interactions they had with LAs during the transition into EHE were either 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful' (vs. 26% who said interactions were 'helpful' or 'very helpful').

Around a third of parents (32%) reported that the interactions they had with the LA while home educating were either 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful' – a slightly lower proportion than those who described these interactions as either 'helpful' or 'very helpful' (38%).

That said, just over a quarter of parents (28%) responding to our questionnaire reported having received no interaction with the LA during the transition into EHE, with 11% having had no interaction during EHE. All but one of the 14 parents who had experienced an EHE to school transition reported having had no contact with their LA regarding this phase of their journey.

Parents were invited to explain what could have been better about the interactions they had with the LA during their EHE journey. Across the questionnaires and the interviews, parents reported experiencing hostility from their LA over their decision to home educate. A few parents stated that their LA either tried to dissuade them from taking their child out of school, or made them feel like they had made the wrong decision.

"I know that the council here think that all children should be in school. I told the teacher at the school this and she didn't think that was a problem. But, that's like your midwife telling you that there should be no home births. If you don't think children should be born at home, work in a hospital. If you don't think children should be home educated, don't work in home education because you will always be against them [home educators]." (interview)

"They treat home educators with disdain and make it clear they do not agree with home education." (questionnaire)

Some parents attributed the negativity they experienced to wider contextual factors, specifically, the LA not having detailed guidance (i.e. from government) about how they should interact with prospective home educators and the EHE community more broadly.

"I think local authorities are in a tricky position because in law, parents are responsible to educate their children at school or otherwise. But, the 'otherwise' is just kind of like 'ah! Do whatever you like'. Then it's kind of flung onto local authorities to make sure [suitable education] happens, which isn't really fair on them because [the definition] is so woolly. I think this is what's causing the problems we're having in our area. I know that there are some other local authorities that are bad like ours and others that aren't, which is really nice." (interview)

"I get the feeling that there was an exponential rise in home education during lockdown and local authorities are trying to find their position. I don't think they're quite clear about their position. I don't think that they see their primary role as being involved in supporting. I think they feel anxious about this growing movement which is beyond their control and they're kind of concerned about what's going on within it and they feel this need to start introducing some kind of regulation." (interview)

Unhelpful interactions with schools

The majority of parents responding to our questionnaire reported that the interactions they had with their child's school during the deregistration process and transition to EHE were either 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful' (57%). Only 6% of parents said interactions were 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. Just under a third of parents (29%) reported having received no advice or guidance from the school during this transition.

Several parents explicitly mentioned a lack of understanding of, or resistance to, their reasoning for choosing EHE, and schools' poor/limited communication.

"The high school refused to take my daughter off roll, probably due to wanting the funding. They need to be mindful of the law and take children off register when told."
(questionnaire)

"They could have sat down and spoken with me about in in depth. I just had a letter."
(questionnaire)

Some interviewees who reported having communication issues with schools said that they thought schools felt no obligation to the child and family following deregistration. Whilst they said that this was somewhat expected (as the child would no longer be the responsibility of

the school), parents said they would have appreciated better communication regarding their child's current level of learning to facilitate a smooth transition.

"Once you deregister, you don't expect them [schools] to support that much, but it could have been good to...get some idea of what direction to take them [the children], especially for the following year." (interview)

Parents also felt that schools needed to improve the way in which they handled their child's SEND/SEMH needs during the transition, though again they did not necessarily expect this from schools once the decision to deregister had been made.

4. Improving families' experience of EHE

We asked for parents' views on improving the home education experience, with a particular emphasis on what LAs and schools could do. Parents suggested that a shift in the attitudes LAs and schools held about EHE and providing resources to facilitate transitions to/from home education were needed.

Improving relationships

A quarter of parents responding to the questionnaire said that LAs needed to work on building positive, transparent and non-judgemental relationships with the home educating community, and that they should be supportive to parents who make the decision to home educate.

"Let the parent know they are not against them, and that they will help, and give the parent time to adjust to home educating the child, and if something is not right, give the parent time to change things so it is right." (questionnaire)

"Know that home education can be really hard work and sometimes worrying, because it is down to the parents and child/ren involved to decide what to learn and how. So, having someone who knows that you are doing your best and really wants you to do well would be encouraging, reassuring and supportive." (questionnaire)

"I was very fortunate to have an amazing LA. However, I know many don't. Please work with the parents. Parents give up so much just to make sure their children are happy so they can thrive better in this world." (questionnaire)

"Work hard to reduce the 'them and us' environment that is thriving in many home ed communities." (questionnaire)

Parents also thought that schools needed to show more understanding and empathy toward their reasons for deciding to home educate. Several parents thought that schools believed the decision to home educate was a 'statement against schools'. Yet many parents explained the decision was made in the best interests of their child at that moment in their education journey.

"Understand that this is something that is likely not the number one option, but parents feel they have this as the only or final choice." (questionnaire)

"Be more understanding. No parent will decide to home educate unless they believe that is the best for their child." (questionnaire)

Providing resources

Parents remarked that schools and LAs could do more to provide them with educational resources and guidance, particularly during the initial transition period, when families faced the prospect of home educating for the first time, and may be anxious about what it entails.

"[After deregistering] I hadn't received any support from [the school] whatsoever... the first thing that came to my mind was that I could have done with a little bit more help material wise. You know, what I could be teaching them and what they should be learning. I didn't really get any of that." (interview)

"What could be better is more information about free things to do online. Newsletters would be good. Otherwise it's quite difficult to find stuff." (interview)

"It would have been good if they could have sent someone [from the LA] out to go through the whole process [of moving to EHE] with us, rather than letters or emails... We didn't have any visits. Just letters and phone calls." (interview)

"It would have been useful if we could have some paper work, you know, like a handover, so we knew what level [child] was at for maths or English. When we started the home education... we went ahead and bought a load of advanced maths and English workbooks and they basically didn't work for them one bit, they were too advanced. So, I could have saved myself some time, money and effort if I knew what level [child] was at." (interview)

For some parents, the provision of resources extended to financial support, particularly for those on a low income. (We note that 32% of parents in our questionnaire said that their child was entitled to free school meals whilst at school; an indicator of low income). Parents suggested that this support might consist of subsidies or vouchers to offset the cost of exams and resources, and access to online learning platforms.

"Maybe it would be good if the LA could provide maths and English tutoring... Even if it was only once a month. It could be helpful for working out what areas you're alright in and what areas you need to work on more... That is also one of the things that can be quite pricey, you know £20, £30 an hour." (interview)

"Home education has been very expensive. Because of [child's] dyspraxia, I've had to get special pens to help them with their grip. Exemplar [an online learning platform] was £400, and then there was the laptop. I feel like the council could have been a little bit more helpful. It would have been good to get some funding to help out." (interview)

Improving transitions

Parents with an experience of their child returning to school after a period of home education suggested that LAs needed to provide clear advice and guidance to families on the re-enrolment process. Parents suggested that schools could improve the transition back into the classroom by: ensuring better communication with the child and family (i.e. more meetings); providing work packs to prepare the child for the curriculum content they would be learning back in the classroom; offering better pastoral support for the child; and offering flexi-schooling or a reduced timetable for children who might struggle being in class full time.

Social activities for EHE families

Parents reported that they were largely unaffected by the disruption caused by national lockdowns when schools were all but fully closed. However, the public health protections in place during the height of the pandemic meant that social activities for children, organised by and for the home education community, were suspended during lockdown. As such, the one negative effect of the pandemic for EHE families revealed through our study appeared to be the slow resumption of these activities after the social distancing restrictions had been lifted. Beyond suggestions directed at LAs and schools, some parents said that increasing opportunities for the EHE community to meet would enhance the home education experience.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report presented findings from a mixed-methods study, drawing on questionnaire and interview data from home educating parents across the South East of England.

In total, 114 parents across eight LAs completed the questionnaire, with 13 of these taking part in follow up interviews. The size of the questionnaire sample, coupled with the fact that parents who might face additional challenges regarding undertaking EHE (e.g. low-income or they/their child has a mental health condition and/or SEND) were very likely overrepresented in the interview sample (at least) means that the study's findings may not be generalisable.

Nevertheless, the findings provide a credible insight into the types of experiences that parents from a variety of backgrounds face regarding EHE and highlights areas for further investigation. Future research should extend beyond parents, and involve schools, LAs and home-educated children in order to obtain a more rounded and representative picture of the EHE landscape, and its successes and challenges.

Here, we summarise four overarching findings from the study, discuss their implications and provide some practical recommendations for LAs and researchers (highlighted in bold).

1. **77% of parents report mental health concerns as a reason for deciding to home educate**

While they reported having multiple reasons for choosing home education, this study adds to evidence from elsewhere (ADCS, 2021) that concerns about their child's mental health are driving parents' decision-making. Parents cited social anxiety or school-induced anxiety, the suitability of and/or dissatisfaction with the school environment, and concerns about its mental health support provision as reasons for deregistering their child. Some parents felt that the lack of school-based provision for mental health left them with no option but to home educate.

Our study, however, provided limited data on the impact of mental health concerns on parents' decision to home educate. **We suggest that more research is needed at the local level to understand the relationship between parents' concerns for their child's mental health and their decision to home educate.**

2. The pandemic gave parents the opportunity to trial, and continue with, EHE – but some children will return to school in the future

While the pandemic had relatively little effect on home education, our study suggests that the national lockdown periods gave parents who were considering EHE the opportunity to trial it – and most of them had continued with it following the full reopening of schools. Some parents, however, indicated an intention to enrol their child back into school at some point in the future.

Although the number of parents who had since re-enrolled their child in school was limited ($n=14$), all but one of them reported having positive interactions with the school during the transition from EHE. (This was in contrast to parents' overall sense of interactions with schools being mostly unhelpful during the transition to EHE). **With a possible rise in the number of children returning to school after EHE, we suggest that LAs identify what schools are doing well regarding the transition from EHE and share practice locally.**

3. While there is variability in parents' perceptions of how helpful they find LAs' advice and guidance during the EHE journey, on balance they report that LAs are more helpful than schools

There were mixed responses over how helpful parents found the advice and guidance offered to them by LAs regarding EHE. However, on balance, parents found their interactions with LAs much more helpful than those they had with schools. Positive interactions were characterised by supportiveness and showing an understanding of parents' decision to home educate. Negative interactions were characterised by a lack of understanding or acceptance of parents' decisions.

4. Attitudes held by some LAs and schools towards parents who home educate must improve

There is still much that can be done to improve the relationships between EHE parents and LAs and schools. Some parents described experiencing a lack of empathy shown by some LAs and schools over their decision to choose EHE over school. Even among those who experienced positive interactions with their LAs, parents suggested that LAs needed to work on building and sustaining positive, non-judgemental and respectful relationships with the EHE community. **We recommend that LA EHE teams could create opportunities to share experience and best practice in order to improve positive relationship building with the EHE community.**

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Reasons for choosing to home educate

In the following section, we would like you to tell us a bit about your reasons for choosing to home educate.

Some questions require you to select one or multiple answers. Some questions ask you to type a few sentences.

1. Which of the reasons below contributed to your decision to home educate? Please tick as many options as applicable. If none of the reasons listed explain what motivated you to home educate, please type your primary reason in the 'other' box. Required
 1. Concerns about my child's physical health
 2. Concerns about my child's mental/emotional health
 3. Concerns about my child's health specifically related to Covid-19
 4. My child did not get a place at preferred school
 5. I had difficulty in accessing a school place for my child
 6. Home educating was a way to prevent legal action
 7. Home educating was a way of avoiding school exclusion
 8. Home educating was a philosophical/lifestyle choice
 9. My child's school suggested home education as an option
 10. I was dissatisfied with the special educational needs and disability provision that was offered at my child's school
 11. I was dissatisfied with how my child's school handled bullying
 12. I was generally dissatisfied with my child's school
 13. Other
 - i. If you selected Other, please specify:
2. Did you discuss your decision to home educate with anybody else before you started? Please tick as many options as applicable. If you discussed your decision with a group not listed, please type them in the 'other' box. Required
 1. I discussed it with my child's school.
 2. I discussed it with my local authority.
 3. I discussed it with other home educating parents.
 4. I discussed it with family and friends.
 5. No, I made the decision on my own.
 6. Other

i. If you selected Other, please specify:

3. Please provide us with any other information you think might be useful for us to know about why you first chose to home educate.
4. If applicable, please provide us with any other information you think is useful for us to know about why you still choose to home educate your child, rather than moving them to a school.

Experiences of transitioning into home education

In the following section, we would like you to tell us a bit about your experiences with the process of moving to home education.

Some questions require you to select one or multiple answers. Some questions ask you to type a few sentences.

The first set of questions focuses on advice and guidance from your local authority.

5. During the process of moving your child from school to home education, did you act on any advice or guidance given to you by your local authority?
 1. Yes
 2. No
6. What advice and guidance, if any, did you receive from your local authority during the process of transitioning your child from school into home education? Please tick as many options as applicable. Required
 1. I did not receive any advice or guidance from my local authority.
 2. Video calls
 3. Telephone calls
 4. Face to face meetings
 5. The LA signposted me to home educating parent network groups or hubs
 6. The LA signposted me to relevant websites and social media
 7. Emails from the local authority
 8. Other

i. If you selected Other, please specify:

7. How helpful was the local authority during the process of transitioning your child from school to home education? Please indicate your answer in the drop-down box below, where 1 = very unhelpful and 5 = very helpful. Required
8. If applicable, what was good about the advice and guidance you received from your local authority during the process of transitioning your child into home education? You may list up to three things. Optional
9. If applicable, what could have been better about the advice and guidance you received from your local authority during the process of transitioning your child into home education? You may list up to three things.
10. What advice would you give to local authorities for improving the advice and guidance they offer to parents who are transitioning their child from school to home education? You may list up to three things.

This set of questions asks about advice and guidance from your child's previous school.

11. What advice and guidance, if any, did you receive from your child's school during the process of transitioning them into home education? Please tick as many options as applicable. Required
 1. I did not receive any advice or guidance from my child's school
 2. Video calls
 3. Telephone calls
 4. Face to face meetings
 5. The school signposted me to home educating parent network groups or hubs
 6. The school signposted me to relevant websites and social media
 7. Emails from the school
 8. Other
 - i. If you selected Other, please specify:

12. How helpful was your child's school during the process of transitioning them to home education? Please indicate your answer in the drop-down box below, where 1 = very unhelpful and 5 = very helpful. Required
13. If applicable, what was good about the advice and guidance you received from your child's school during the process of transitioning them into home education? You may list up to three things.
14. If applicable, what could have been better about the advice and guidance you received from your child's school during the process of transitioning them into home education? You may list up to three things.
15. What advice would you give to schools for improving the advice and guidance they offer to parents who are transitioning their child to home education? You may list up to three things.

This set of questions asks about your general experiences with moving to home education.

16. Was there anything else good about the general process of transitioning your child from school into home education? You may list up to three things.
17. Was there anything else that could have been better about the general process of transitioning your child from school into home education? You may list up to three things.

Experiences of home educating

In the following section, we would like you to tell us a bit about your home educating experience.

Some questions require you to select one or multiple answers. Some questions ask you to type a few sentences.

The first set of questions focuses on advice and guidance from your local authority.

18. What advice and guidance, if any, have you received from your local authority throughout home educating? Please tick as many options as applicable. Required
1. I have not received any advice or guidance from my local authority. Video calls
 2. Telephone calls
 3. Face to face meetings
 4. The LA signposted me to home educating parent network groups or hubs
 5. The LA signposted me to relevant websites and social media
 6. Emails from the local authority
 7. Other

i. If you selected Other, please specify:

19. How helpful has the local authority been throughout your home educating experience?
Please indicate your answer in the drop-down box below, where 1 = very unhelpful and 5 = very helpful. Required
20. If applicable, what has been good about the advice and guidance you have received from your local authority whilst home educating? You may list up to three things. Optional
21. If applicable, what could have been better about the advice and guidance your local authority has provided whilst you have been home educating? You may list up to three things.
22. What advice would you give to local authorities for improving the advice and guidance they offer to parents whilst they are home educating? You may list up to three things.

This set of questions asks about your general experiences with moving to home education.

23. Is there anything else that has been good about your experience of home educating?
You may list up to three things.
24. Is there anything else that could be better about your experience of home educating?
You may list up to three things.

Moving child back to school

The following questions are for parents who have transitioned their child back to school.

Some questions require you to select one or multiple answers. Some questions ask you to type a few sentences.

25. Has your child returned from home education to school within the last three years?
Required
1. Yes, my child now goes to a school (after a period of home education).
 2. No, my child is still being home educated.
26. These first questions ask about advice and guidance from your child's school. How helpful was your child's school in the process of moving them from home education to school? Please indicate your answer using the drop-down list below, where 1 = very unhelpful and 5 = very helpful.
27. What was good in terms of the advice and guidance you received from your child's school throughout the process of transitioning them back into school? You may list up to three things.

28. What could have been better about the advice and guidance you received from your child's school throughout the process of transitioning them back into school? You may list up to three things.
29. What advice would you give to schools for improving the advice and guidance they offer to parents who are transitioning their children back into school? You may list up to three things.
30. These questions ask about advice and guidance from your local authority. How helpful was your local authority during the process of moving your child from home education to formal schooling? Please indicate your answer using the drop-down list below, where 1 = very unhelpful and 5 = very helpful.
31. What was good in terms of the advice and guidance you received from your local authority throughout the process of transitioning your child back into school? You may list up to three things.
32. What could have been better about the advice and guidance you received from your local authority throughout the process of transitioning your child back into school? You may list up to three things.
33. What advice would you give to local authorities for improving the advice and guidance they provide to parents who are transitioning their children from home education back into school? You may list up to three things.
34. These questions ask about your general experiences with moving your child from home education to formal schooling. Is there anything else that has been good about your experience of transitioning your child from home education back into school? You may list up to three things.
35. Is there anything else that could have been better in regards to your experience of transitioning your child from home education back into school? You may list up to three things.

Tell us about yourself

The following questions ask you to tell us a bit about yourself. We ask for this information to make sure that we are capturing data from parents with a range of different experiences.

36. What year did you start home educating?
 1. 2019
 2. 2020
 3. 2021
 4. 2022
37. In what term did you start home educating?

1. Term 1 (September - December)
2. Term 2 (January - April)
3. Term 3 (May - July)

38. Please tell us which year group your child is in. Required

1. Year 1 (ages 5-6)
2. Year 2 (ages 6-7)
3. Year 3 (ages 7-8)
4. Year 4 (ages 8-9)
5. Year 5 (ages 9-10)
6. Year 6 (ages 10-11)
7. Year 7 (ages 11-12)
8. Year 8 (ages 12-13)
9. Year 9 (ages 13-14)
10. Year 10 (ages 14-15)
11. Year 11 (ages 15-16)

39. What is the first half of your postcode? We ask for this information to ensure that all the local authority areas involved in this research are represented. Required

40. How many children are you home educating? Required

41. Do you have any children who go to school? If so, how many?

42. Which of the following best describes your ethnic background? Required

1. White Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
2. White Irish
3. White Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other White background
5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background
9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background
14. African
15. Caribbean
16. Any other Black/African/Caribbean background
17. Arab

18. Prefer not to say

19. Other

i. If you selected Other, please specify:

43. Does your child have an education, health and care plan (EHCP)? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

44. When your child was at school, were they entitled to free school meals? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

45. Has your child ever been classed as a looked-after child/a child in care? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

46. Did you enter the UK as a refugee/asylum seeker? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

47. Did your child enter the UK as a refugee/asylum seeker? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

48. Have you been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition by a health professional? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

49. Has your child been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition by a health professional? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

50. Are you receiving medical support for a mental health issue? Required

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

51. Is your child receiving medical support for a mental health issue? Required

1. Yes
2. No
3. Prefer not to say

52. Have you already completed this questionnaire in reference to another child that you are home educating? Required

1. Yes
2. No

Appendix 2: Interview and focus group schedule

Reasons for deciding to home educate

1. What were your reasons for deciding to home educate?
2. Did you discuss your decision with anybody?
3. Did you think about any alternative options?

Process of transitioning child from formal schooling to home education

1. How did you find the overall experience of transitioning your child from formal school to home education?
2. How helpful was the school? What was good/bad about their input? If anything, what could be done to improve their input?
3. How helpful was your local authority? What was good/bad about their input? If anything, what could be done to improve their input?

Experiences of home educating

1. How have you found home educating? What has gone well? What could be better?
2. Has your local authority been involved in your home education? Have they provided any advice/guidance? What was good and what could have been better?

(Where applicable) The process of transitioning child from home education to school

1. How did you find the overall experience of transitioning your child home education to school?
2. How helpful was the school? What was good/bad about their input? If anything, what could be done to improve their input?
3. How helpful was your local authority? What was good/bad about their input? If anything, what could be done to improve their input?
4. Anything else you would like to say about your experience with home educating?