

Elective Home Education Consultation Meeting

Woodlands
23rd November 2011

Present: Mike Snelson, Acting Principal Advisor, Frances Molloy, School Attendance Lead, Joe Dykes, Head of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Achievement, 33 Attendees

Welcome and Introductions

MS opened the meeting by welcoming all attendees and introducing the representatives from LCC. The meeting will provide an opportunity to feedback on the consultation document, notes will be taken and distributed to all families on the register as well as the forum group to make available on their website.

The Lancashire forum group had put forward a submission, written by Ian Dowty, to be used in the consultation. It was confirmed that the document was able to be used by LCC as long as any use was attributed correctly.

The Law

MS asked the group for their comments regarding the law section

Issue with the definitions "Monitoring" "Roles and Responsibilities"

One issue was with door stepping. There is no problem with contact being made but it was felt that families should not need to stay on the register following the visit. A member of the group commented that families should not be door stepped when there was no strong reason to do so. They felt that a letter would suffice and be less intrusive.

One attendee fed back on their experience. They chose not to register their child and were visited from a CME officer. Following the visit they received a letter from the LA advising "now you have registered your child". They were unhappy as they did not have to register their child and felt that their rights were infringed upon.

MS clarified that CME does not sit within the same part of the directorate as the EHE team, although this does not absolve us from any issues and comments relating to their input to EHE will be fed back to that team. FM has had a conversation with Terry Clark, Head of Pupil Access, where CME sits. He has advised that where CME receive notification that a family are home educating this would not precipitate contact. Contact would be made if CME were made aware that a child was not attending school and where there was no mention of alternative provision.

County Councillor Sam Chapman introduced himself to the group and referred to page 6 of the document advising that parents have no legal requirement to provide information when the LA asks for information about a child's education. He advised that most families do not need to be accountable to the LA and until the document fully reflected this his advice to constituents would be to say or do nothing.

Another concern raised was that LCC have used CME guidance to justify annual monitoring yet there is no legal justification for annual monitoring.

It was commented that throughout the document there is reference to "once the local authority is satisfied" yet there is no reason for people being asked to be satisfied unless there is an appearance that no education is taking place. Parents have no legal obligation to satisfy.

One member commented that if a child is not in school there is no obligation to notify the LA. Lots of homeschoolers opt to stay off the radar as they view the LA as "bullish". It needs to be a voluntary arrangement that needs to be respected.

Response by MS – There is now a new team in place and it is hoped that a different approach will be seen

EHE Officers

Concerns were raised regarding the background of EHE officers being teachers. One member commented that you do not need a PGCE to home educate and home educating is nothing to do with school education. It was felt that the first paragraph in section 2 of the document says "This is how you should do it, however, this is what you do"

A member of the group advised that their initial contact with the LA had been negative however over the years it had improved but has now slipped back to what it was previously.

Concerns were raised over the information given out by EHE officers.

MS asked the group if there were any examples of where it worked well.

One member responded by saying that she had found her contact with the LA very supportive, however offers of help were limited i.e. arranging work experience.

It was suggested that the LA should offer services rather than purely monitoring.

Another member commented that they had found their contact with the LA positive and not intrusive, however, they did not agree with the officer asking the child how they felt about being home educated.

Lots of parents do not do anything for up to 12 months (de-schooling) in order to move away from the school mentality. They would like the de-schooling process to be included.

SEN

The group were asked for their feedback on the section Children with Special Educational Needs.

Individuals commented that they were struggling to get through this section as the law is very vague. The issues were with the timescales. Parents have no idea of the timescales and feel there is no sense of urgency. Reviews take several months and during that time families are in limbo. It was felt that if a child's needs are specified in a statement there should not be a need for a review and that a meeting with the officer and the parent should suffice.

FM confirmed that you do not have to wait for permission before you can start home educating.

CC Sam Chapman referred to the section of the document on page 10, "As a general rule no funds are available support the statement other than in exceptional circumstances as in most instances the LA will have identified a school placement where all needs set out in the statement can be met". He advised that boundaries between funding and education are slowly being torn down and that this does not sit well with government policy. One parent advised that once their child had been de-registered that therapy services were then cut.

Another family advised that they had requested to have their son tested for dyslexia, the EHE officer had advised that they needed to fund themselves and when they approached their doctor he advised that they would need to go through school.

There is no mention of the use of school attendance orders in the document and it does not give any information on the processes. It was felt that CME is used at the threat and it does not show the clear route which is followed when no education is taking place. On the flow chart it shows arrows going into CME but none coming out. It was also mentioned that the documents refer to reporting on the number of referrals to CME but a better measure would be to provide the number of school attendance orders issued.

The question was raised by the group why the documents were not put out with the consultation. MS advised that this was because they would be subject to change. The question was put to MS "Can we have your word that these documents will be consulted on?" MS confirmed that any of the new documents used specifically by the EHE team will be shared before they are finalised

Members had great concerns regarding the traveller document which was written in 2008 and updated in February of this year.

JD had not seen this document and would be looking into this further.

Action – MS to find out when they were last written

The question was raised why the LA have to produce their own version of the national guidelines.

Break

In the second half of the meeting MS opened the floor to comments

One parent advised that their decision to register had been something which they had regretted as they felt the relationship had deteriorated in the last 2-3 year. They believe that officers do not understand what the legal situation is and that there were definite training issues.

Continuity was raised as an issue as some families have had several EHE officers visit. One parent commented on the form which officers have to complete. They advised that home education is not about boxes and that you cannot fit autonomous education in boxes.

The group fed back how useful it would be if they had access to extra books from the libraries and also the use of the school library service, music service, environmental projects as well as registration for software for students. Exam centres were also a problem for families who were not able to afford the costs. Any funding for that would be of benefit. When looking at exam access also need to look at other options such as BTEC , open university course etc,

A parent informed that the group that they had applied for funding for their child to attend a 1 day a week college course which was initially refused. After pursuing it further the full funding was provided through CME

FM advised that there had already been conversations with the school music and library services. The music service are currently doing some work with HE families but looking at whether this could be more widely available/better known.. Also in the process of trying to pull together list of exam centres.

MS advised that also looking at how we can get information which is going out to schools out to families who are home educating.

Members of the forum advised that they could supply the LA with useful information which could then be passed onto families

EHE Team

Concerns were raised regarding the new team as one of the job descriptions was that they were to have had teaching experience. There were worries that the new officers would be of the mindset that Home educators need watching. The question was asked if the new officers had any home educating background. Home educators are passionate about what they do and they would like to see this passion from the team. It is important that the officers have increased knowledge of home education before visiting homes.

FM advised that group that 2 of the posts were on teaching terms and conditions and 1 post was not on teaching terms and conditions with those appointed having varying experience with home education. One member commented that the LA's treatment of HE families in the past has made them not trust the authority and they are looking for the hidden agenda.

Response from MS – This was a major issue for the authority but moving forward it needs to be right and the LA is trying to be as open as possible. There had been discussions about having the team's photographs and profiles on the website – further advice being sought.

Home educators are made to feel like deviants which are why they hide away when home education is simply a different choice. It is important that the support and advice is not about one style of education. Officers should not just support what is done in schools

The families would like policies and procedures which directly benefit the child.

Timescales

The group asked for timescales.

MS advised that there would be a meeting on the 5th December looking at the responses from the consultation where there would be legal representation. The final document to be written by 15th December to be signed off in January. Failing this signing off would be February.

The group raised concerns that they would not have sight of the amended document and supporting documents before it was signed off.

Action – MS to check on protocols for cabinet member

Close

MS closed the meeting by thanking everyone for attending and advised the group that this meeting would not be a one off but that future regional network meetings would be arranged.