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Written evidence submitted by Dr Amber Fensham-Smith

Dr Amber Fensham-Smith, BA, MSc, PhD, FHEA (November 2020)
Evidence submitted to The Education Committee: Home Education Inquiry

Title: Partnership building and representing the voices of electively home educated children and young people in policy making

1. Executive Summary: This submission addresses two of points in The Committees call for evidence: *the duties of local authorities with regards to home education, including safeguarding and assuring the quality of home education, and the benefits children gain from home education, and the potential disadvantages they may face.* The author highlights that there are number of gaps, challenges and limitations associated with EHE research evidence base. Key issues highlighted in this submission are:

- a) The underrepresentation of EHE children and young people's voices within EHE research and/or how this might inform the policy making process;
- b) The provision of comprehensive training for Local Authorities; the importance of partnership building and ways in which multiple stakeholders might collaborate to extend existing support;
- c) The absence of, and need for, longitudinal research to better understand the holistic experiences of EHE young people.

2. Submitter: This submission has been prepared by Dr Fensham-Smith¹, a Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies and a member of the Children's Research Centre, Open University. Fensham-Smith has been an active researcher of elective home education (EHE) since 2012².

- a) The views and opinions prepared and expressed in this individual submission solely reflect those of the author, and not those of the author's employer, organisation, learned society or any other group or individual that they may be affiliated with.

Local Authorities: data management, support and building authentic partnerships

3. Fensham-Smith's (2017)³ study of 242 home-educating families (UK wide), surfaced several ongoing tensions and challenges linked to 'mistrust' and fractious relationships between home educators and Local Authorities in the aftermath of the Badman Review⁴. Without wishing to resurface the particularities and challenges associated with this review, it is worth stating that fears, tensions and mistrust as a reaction to the review have negatively impacted relationship building between EHE groups and Local Authorities (LAs) since the publication of the Education Committee's report on Support for Home Education in 2012.

4. The quality and rigour of the evidence base within which comments on safeguarding risks and 'off rolling', is highly problematic. The author wishes to highlight the issues and inconsistencies

¹ Fensham-Smith co-convenes the British Educational Research Association's Special Interest Group in Alternative Education: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/community/alternative-education>

² For a details of current and previous work, visit: <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/people/afs232#tab2>

³ Fensham-Smith, A.J (2017) New Technologies, Knowledge, Networks and Communities in Home-education, Unpublished PhD Thesis: Cardiff University.

⁴ Badman, G. (2009) Review of Elective Home-education in England. London: DCSF.

associated with self-reported studies such as the ADCS annual Elective Home Education Survey⁵, which does not appear to capture a discrete data collection ‘sweep’.

5. Surveys and reports that are based on FOIs, for instance, rely on LAs maintaining accurate and up-to-date records. As these models are highly individualised, there is no comprehensive picture of how LAs manage their existing data collection practices and the ways in which they share resources in order to provide timely and evidenced based decision-making to support to EHE families across regions.

6. To honour the ‘Open Services Agenda’ and promote consistency of practice, auditing the existing data management practices of LAs would strengthen the reliability of the limited evidence available in the public domain.

7. The limited research available has suggested that since 2015, support and partnerships between LAs and EHE communities continues to function as a ‘postcode lottery’⁶. Given the reported rise in ‘last resort’ families whose children possess additional, and often complex, special educational needs and/or mental health conditions, timely access to vital services such as CAMHS and EHPs should be as equitable for EHE families as they are for the ‘schooled’ population.

8. At present, one issue that continues to act as barrier in developing a portfolio of support services (designed with and alongside the needs of local EHE families) is the absence of public facing resources that showcase a range of different models and LA partnerships of ‘good practice’. A nationally funded information support hub and an annual conference might further extend sharing of best practice among LAs.

9. Research has highlighted that, currently, there is insufficient resource in the form of funding and training for Education Welfare Officers and other stakeholders who engage with EHE families. Some of the self-reported challenges that have hindered meaningful partnership building stem from the absence of comprehensive support; currently limited to areas such as safeguarding and PREVENT training.

10. With the widespread availability of massively open online courses (e.g. Open Learn⁷), The Committee could commission experienced EHE parents, EHE researchers and LAs to co-produce a course to extend understanding of the varied pedagogic practices of EHE families and what education and learning could look like within the context of varied EHE practice⁸.

The underrepresentation of children and young people’s voices in the UK EHE research

11. The author wishes to highlight that insight gleaned from existing empirical evidence on the relative benefits and disadvantages that EHE children and young people may face has significant short comings.

⁵ ADCS ‘Elective Home Education Survey 2019’ available at: <https://adcs.org.uk/education/article/elective-home-education-survey-2019>

⁶ Mukwamba-Sendell, F. (2019) Policy interpreted: the effect of local authority administration and officer perception and practice on national-education policy implementation, *Unpublished doctoral thesis*, Lancaster University, see also: Merrett, J. (2020) ‘The Voice of Experienced Elective Home Educating (EHE) parents: the risk of missing home-educated children in the education policy response to school closure and lessons for adapting home learning’, *Written evidence submitted the UK EHE select committee*, available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/9204/html/>

⁷ <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/open-educational-resources/openlearn>

⁸ There are number existing micro-credentials and open badge courses and resources and articles hosted on OpenLearn and FutureLearn pedagogic approaches, health and wellbeing etc.:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses> <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses/full-catalogue>

- a) Most UK wide empirical research studies to date (1990-2020⁹) have not sufficiently represented or addressed the needs, voices and experiences of EHE children through their own voices. Studies that purport to have used ‘family-based’ interviews tend to prioritise the perspectives of parents. There are only a handful of studies that have sought to prioritise children’s voices in design, analysis and representation of findings.
 - b) There is not a single, systematic and longitudinal study in the UK that has mapped the long-term experiences and transitions of previously EHE young people. The individual stories of children’s ‘success’ exist primarily via EHE parents self-reported stories on social media and in discussions in offline community groups. It is important that a more comprehensive representation of home education is developed by working with EHE young people.
 - c) If the UK-wide EHE population is diverse, no study (to the best of the author’s knowledge) has represented the needs, voices and experiences of EHE children and young people from different socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds (e.g. Gypsy and Traveller and Roma communities¹⁰ and Black and Asian British communities).
 - d) Given that several studies have highlighted racism, ‘othering’ and ‘exclusion’ experienced by EHE parents¹¹, it is vital that EHE children are represented adequately, not just within research, by being invited to shape the policies and decision-making that is likely to affect them.
12. The small collection of case studies¹² that have represented a snapshot of EHE children and young people’s experiences seem to indicate the following positives and relative challenges:
- a) A strong awareness and perception of sense of self: ‘confident’; ‘well rounded’; ‘self-assured’; ‘free thinking’; ‘determined’; ‘imaginative’¹³
 - b) An awareness of ‘the other’ in relation to their own EHE experiences and ‘schooled’ children; ‘special’; ‘unique’; ‘privileged’; ‘better’¹⁴
 - c) A perception of wider society and future pathways; ‘positive world view’; ‘motivated’; ‘forward thinking’¹⁵
13. While the data in Fensham-Smith’s (2017) first EHE UK wide study was collected in 2013, it seems pertinent to exemplify some of voices of EHE children and young people (source: Fensham-Smith, 2019: p220-224¹⁶):

⁹ A systematic review of methods in UK home education studies: recommendations for development and practice (2019) Flack, Z. and Fensham-Smith, A. In : University of Brighton Second Education Research and Enterprise Conference (14 Jun 2019, Brighton)

¹⁰ D’Arcy, K. (2014) ‘Home-education, school, Travellers and educational inclusion’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 35(5): 818-835.

¹¹ Pattison, H. (2020) ‘Muslim Home Educators in the time of Prevent’ *International Review of Qualitative Research*. 00(0) 1–23; Myers, M. and Bhopal, K. (2018) ‘Muslims, home education and risk in British society’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39:2, 212-226.

¹² Kunzman, R. and Gaither, M. (2020) ‘Homeschooling: An Updated Comprehensive Survey of the Research’, *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 9 (1): 253-336.

¹³ Jones, T. (2013) ‘Through the lens of home-educated children: engagement in education’, *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 29:2, 107-12.

¹⁴ Ryan, L. (2019) *Elective Home Education in Wales: Post-16 Transition and the Role of the Educational Psychologist*, *Unpublished Doctorate in Educational Research (DedPsy)*, Cardiff University.

¹⁵ Nelson, J. (2014) ‘Home Education: Exploring the views of parents, children and young people’, *Unpublished Doctoral Thesis*, The University of Birmingham.

¹⁶ All the quotes have been presented using pseudonyms.

- a) *The internet is a massive tool; the amount of free resources you can get was helpful... I also managed to get into college doing ICT without having to any GCSEs...I finished a computer science course this year through Harvard University, it's the same course that they were offering their first-year university students but it was free... With the course, itself, you login and there are lectures, with it being computer stuff you also get problem sets every week, you complete those and it goes on a database... (Dylan, home educated young person).*
- b) Andrew articulated that at 16 years old, he felt that he had 'missed the boat' with regards to sitting GCSEs exams. At 14, he recalled 'not doing well': *I was supposed to be doing GCSEs, although I am a bit late for them. Most of the people my age finished them by now. I did three GCSEs from the ages of 11 to 13. I didn't do very well. ...Now I'd like to do an ancient history course on Coursera... (Andrew, home-educated teenager).*
- c) *You get to be your own person. That is one of the main things that I love about it. There are some things that maybe I would have got ostracized for it [at] school, but because I am in this sort of atmosphere I haven't... (Billie, a home-educated young person).*
- d) *I've got a very solid backing in knowing what I want to do with my life... You get a very strong sense of self... (Cole, a home-educated young person).*
- e) *I think I have become a better person for being home-educated than I would have been had I gone to school.... Freedom is a gift and a bit of a curse, because you can just end up not doing stuff for a very long time... My mum is starting a new career and she was really busy, so I've had to teach a lot of my GCSEs to myself, which is really quite difficult. I've had to read books, write down everything that I know about it, looking at questions on the internet and reading past papers...all from scratch...the problem was that I ended up learning the wrong tier for my Maths, so I had to revise it all again... (Stephanie home ed. young person).*
- f) *I think for me the main thing is, that because I got to choose what I learned about, I don't have an aversion to education because I think it's all boring. Whereas at school you are forced to do subjects you don't like, with teachers you don't get on with, for many hours a day... It's much better I think, having the opportunity to learn yourself. I like the stuff I do and I'm excited to start college... (Billie, a home-educated young person).*

14. Notwithstanding the unique impact of exam cancellation upon private candidates who have been left without exam grades as a result of Covid-19, the difficulties that EHE children and young people face in accessing formal qualifications prior to 2020, has been documented¹⁷. From the perspective of equity, it is highly unjust that where an EHE family resides will dictates the extent to which they may or may not receive subsidy towards the cost of GCSEs (should they wish to pursue this pathway).

15. Overall, there is no sound empirical evidence to substantiate the claims that children who receive EHE in the UK as a short-, medium- or long-term intervention have 'better' or 'worse' life chances and social outcomes in comparison to children who have received a formal schooled education throughout the ages of compulsory education. Any future attempts to measure the relative benefits and/or potential disadvantages of EHE should be broad and encompass a range of short-, medium- and long-term self-report experiences and 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes.

16. It is difficult to find sustainable sources of funding for EHE research. Much of the EHE research evidence base has been generated through 'one-off' small scale doctoral projects. There is a need for

¹⁷ Fensham-Smith, A.J (2019) Becoming a Home-Educator in a Networked World: Towards the Democratisation of Education Alternatives? *Other education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 8(1): 12-35.

Fensham-Smith, A. (2014) 'Gypsy and Traveller Education: Engaging Families- A Research Report', *Welsh Government*, Available at: <http://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2014/141125-gypsy-traveller-education-engagingfamilies-en.pdf> [Accessed 01 December 2019].

new and existing research to feed into the future development of local and national policy over several years. Longitudinal projects (co-produced with and for the EHE communities) will serve to better inform the current and future needs of EHE children and young people.

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