

DRAFT Elective Home Education Scrutiny Review

Wednesday 24 January 2024

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Membership of the Childrens Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

(Previous Committee)

Members

Cllr Geoff Winnard, (Chair).
Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair).
Cllr Margaret Alipoor.
Cllr Julie Humphreys.
Cllr Ralph Berry.
Cllr Carol Thirkill.
Cllr Jeanette Sunderland.
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Alternate Members

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Voting Co-Opted Members

Church Representative – Joyce Simpson.
Parent Governor Representatives – Fauzia Raza and Shifa Simab.

Non-Voting Co-Opted Members

Teacher Secondary School Representative – Tom Bright.
Children’s Social Care – Dr Samina Karim.

(Current Committee)

Members

Cllr Debbie Davies, (Chair).
Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair).
Cllr Susan Fricker.
Cllr Nussrat Mohammed.
Cllr Karen Regan.
Cllr Carol Thirkill.
Cllr Amjad Zaman.
Cllr Jeanette Sunderland.
Cllr Talat Sajawal.

Alternate Members

Cllr Margert Alipoor.
Cllr Ralph Berry.
Cllr Julie Humphries.
Cllr Ibrar Hussain.
Cllr Andy Walsh.
Cllr Sally Birch.
Cllr Bob Felstead.
Cllr Aislin Naylor.
Cllr Noor Elahi.

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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present this report of a review undertaken by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the issues and challenges around Elective Home Education and how this is being supported across the Bradford District. This review was delayed by Covid lockdowns and subsequently by the committee's heavy work programme which has to focus on children's social care services.

The Education Act 1996 requires that parents have a responsibility to ensure that their children are provided with a "sufficient full-time education appropriate to age and ability etc" "but this does not have to be in a mainstream school. Some parents elect to educate their children at home and decline the opportunity of a school place. Evidence suggests that the number of home educated children had increased post Covid. The rationale for deciding to "home school "is often connected to parental philosophy of education and we heard from some families who were clearly well equipped to provide appropriate education and were achieving good educational outcomes for their children.

Whilst local authorities do not have legal powers to monitor education at home they do have a responsibility to intervene if evidence suggests suitable education is not being provided at home. There are some concerns that under the current legal dispensation that this was difficult and they were unable to effectively ensure that suitable education was being provided in all circumstances.

However, the committee was particularly concerned that not all families being home schooled were necessarily doing it by choice and some felt forced into it because they were concerned that the special educational needs of their children could not be met satisfactorily by the mainstream Bradford School available to them. Some of these families clearly need additional support from Bradford Council

The committee was also concerned that some children may have slipped out of the school system after the Covid lockdowns and risk dropping out of the system altogether with potential safeguarding issues

The recommendations made in this report suggest ways Bradford Council can better support and engage with home schooling parents which should help to ensure that appropriate education is being provided. Secondly it addresses ways to improve the support and options available to those children with special educational needs who feel forced into home education. Some of this would link with the ongoing work to improve SEND services across the district.

I would like to thank the members of the committee for their sustained commitment throughout this process, as well as officers who have supported the committee throughout this scrutiny review.

Cllr Geoff Winnard
Chair, Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
March 2023

I wish to thank former councillor Geoff Winnard for all his work leading on this Scrutiny Review. Having taken over as Chair earlier this year I'd like to add a few observations, as follows:

1. We need to respect parents/carers wishes in home educating their child/ren and support them to do so in any way possible including ensuring, in the case of their children who newly become home educated, that they are aware of any support networks and activities available specifically for home educated children.
2. We need to differentiate between children whose parents/carers have chosen to home educate them and those who are effectively forced to attempt to home educate because they have been unhappy with the school their child was allocated or their negative school experience.
3. There are genuine concerns about safeguarding of children who are not in school – could there be some expansion maybe from the Virtual School to ensure children are seen by a professional away from family to check on their welfare and educational development and support provided accordingly.

I would like to thank those parents and carers who participated in our review along with councillors who have taken the time to learn more about elective home education, and with particular thanks to Officers for facilitating the sessions and gathering information.

Cllr Debbie Davies
Chair, Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
December 2023

Executive Summary

The four information gathering sessions undertaken as part of this Scrutiny Review focused on the seven key areas for improvement, in accordance with the Terms of Reference, adopted by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Specifically, the committee resolved to undertake a scrutiny review into Elective Home Education:

The key lines of enquiry for this scrutiny review are to:

- Explore the proportion of home schooled children who are home schooled, because the child has not been allocated the preferred school place;
- Explore the approach where parents consider that their child will receive a better education at home, rather than school;
- Explore the proportion of children, who have been moved on by the school, into "Elective Home Education";
- Review the safeguarding of children, who are outside the normal school system;
- Explore and consider the impact of COVID19 on school lockdown, as parents also choose to home educate their children.
- Evaluate the arrangements in place to support parents whose children are undertaking Elective Home Education.
- Considering the Special Education needs requirements of children in Elective Home Education.

As a result of the review, this Committee has made recommendations for consideration. These are contained (a) within the body of the report and (b) summarised at the end for ease of reference.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a programme of scrutiny reviews relating to Children's Services.

One of the agreed scrutiny reviews relates to Elective Home Education.

The completion of this scrutiny review has been delayed due to the COVID19 Pandemic and then subsequent membership changes to the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

During the course of the information gathering sessions for this scrutiny review, the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee engaged widely with, parents who were educating their children at home, parents' groups, an education charity and officers from Bradford Council.

Key Aims and Scrutiny Process

The key aims of this stage in the scrutiny review are as outlined on the previous page.

Members have received and gathered a range of information from a number of different sources, including:

- relevant documents;
- relevant data;
- written submissions from, or meetings with, interested parties.

Context

Despite the term 'compulsory school age', education does not have to be undertaken through attendance at school, even though parents usually request a state-funded school place and the local authority is obliged to find one - or make alternative arrangements for education of their child. Parents not the state are responsible for ensuring that children of compulsory school age are properly educated.

Elective home education is a term used to describe a choice by parents to provide education for their children at home or in some other way they desire, instead of sending them to school full-time. This is different to education provided by a local authority other than at a school, for example for children who are too ill to attend school.

There is no legislation that deals with home education as a specific approach. However, Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 provides that:

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable -

- (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
- (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

Elective home education is a form of ‘education otherwise than at school’ and this piece of legislation is the basis for the obligations of parents. It is also the starting point for local authorities’ involvement.

Local Context

Information from officers in Bradford Council’s Children’s Services, shows below the number of children across the district over the last five years, in Elective Home Education.

Table 1 - Number of children recorded as Elective Home Educated by academic year.

	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Open 1 st September.	463	510	443	626	596
Total over the year.	776	730	975	1011	785 (to 23/02/23)

Whilst the number of children recorded as Elective Home Educated at any one time has generally, steadily increased, significant churn is seen in the number of children who become Elective Home Educated or end a period of Elective Home Educated in any one year.

As an example, in the course of the academic year 2021/2022, from the table above it can be seen that 385 children began to be home educated, either by becoming statutory school age, moving to the district, being identified as potentially Children Missing Education or by being removed from a school roll. In the same year 414 children ended being Electively Home Educated, either by becoming no longer compulsory school age, by leaving the district or returning to a school roll.

Information provided by officers in Bradford Councils Children’s Services highlighted that:

- The number of children home schooled because they missed out on their school of choice, was 21 children.
- It was also learned that the number of children, who have been moved on by the school, into “Elective Home Education”, was nil.
- Furthermore, 40 children who are being home educated have an Educational and Health Care Plan.

Moreover, parents are not required to give a reason, so in the cases of 489 children we have no recorded reason as to why their children are being educated at home.

At its meeting on Thursday 9 November 2023, the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered Bradford Council’s Second Quarter Financial Position Statement. Within this, Bradford Council’s Risk Register was also included.

Elective Home Education was identified as an area of risk within the Risk Register and highlighted that in September 2020, there were 484 children recorded as being Elective

Home Educated. This number increased over the following three months to more than 800.

Chapter 2 – Key Findings

This section presents the findings of the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee review of Elective Home Education.

It was clear from consultations with parents who had decided to home educate their children, that the benefits of home educating were evident to them. Parents could meet in small groups of different aged children, whilst also learning from older role models and learn to care and nurture for younger children. As well as this, children can also learn at their own pace.

Members heard that the home education community around Yorkshire is popular and one that is rich in activities, with parents willing to make things happen for their children. There are numerous activities in Bradford, such as home education specific sessions at sports venues, social meet-up groups, ad hoc park meets, art lessons, nature group, hiking group, Lego group and a book group. Parents also travelled out of the district to attend other groups in the local area, such as board game groups, trampolining, gaming, coding and cookery. There are also home education specific days at museums and attractions such as The Deep and Eureka, and many parents organise ‘school trip’-type visits where groups of home educated children attended as though they were a school class.

The key findings will be considered under the recurring issues that have arisen during this scrutiny review and have centred upon:

- More effective communication with Bradford Council and the Elective Home Education community and awareness raising;
- Greater understanding amongst schools in the District, in relation to Special Educational Needs;
- Support to parents and families who choose to home educate their children.

Communication and Awareness Raising

A consistent theme that was raised throughout the information gathering session with parents of those children who were being educated at home, centred upon the communication with Bradford Council’s Children’s Services. For instance, some parents stated that officers from Bradford Council had never been to visit and check how their child was being educated at home, although, of course, it could be noted that there is a cohort of home educators that believes such visits can amount to unwarranted interference.

Parents also felt that the letters sent to them from Bradford Council’s Children’s Services, could be written in a friendlier and supportive manner, as well as letters being addressed to them by name, rather than ‘parent /carer’.

Parents were also of the view that Bradford Council’s Children’s Services expected parents to respond very quickly to their written communications, otherwise the letters were escalated very quickly. Subsequently, parents felt that they should have more time to respond to such correspondence, as by the nature of their choice to home educate their children, parents were, “time poor”.

During the information gathering sessions for this scrutiny review, officers from Bradford Council's Children's Services informed members of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee that they did proactively contact parents whose children were being educated at home, through a questionnaire to parents.

Some parents also stated that there needed to be greater awareness of home education, for other professionals, such as in the field of health. In particular, it was felt that health professionals who do not understand home education, were of the view that home educated children stayed at home all the time and did not interact with the community. Subsequently, parents felt that such health professionals needed to learn about what home education is and how well it works for so many families.

A unanimous view amongst parents was that Bradford Council's Children's Services needed to build better trust through effective communication, with the Elective Home Education community.

Special Educational Needs

During the information gathering process for this scrutiny review, members of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee also heard that some parents decided to home educate their children, as their perception was that schools did not meet the Special Educational Needs of their children. Consequently, parents decided not to send their children to school and home educated instead. Furthermore, members also heard that in some cases, children had been refused an Educational Health and Care Plan on grounds on which the parents couldn't agree and consequently, they didn't want to send their children to school. This was seen as a last resort by parents who felt that, they had no choice but to educate their children at home.

Parents also felt that schools are unwilling to make reasonable adjustments to assist them, thus forcing children to attend school. This was causing serious mental health problems for children.

There was consensus amongst parents here that an improved understanding of what Special Educational Needs are, was required, along with focused training being provided to Special Educational Needs Coordinators and teachers, which they thought would greatly improve the support being provided to children with conditions such as autism and dyslexia.

Support to Parents

Furthermore, there was strong consensus amongst parents who were educating their children at home that they were perceived as not teaching their children properly. However, parents were more than happy and expressed their desire to work with the Bradford Council's Children's Services.

Parents also indicated that they chose to educate their children at home as it gave them a sense of pride and joy. As well as this, it allowed their children to learn about

current affairs easily and in real time, for instance in relation to the cost of living, getting involved in the community and environment by exploring, arrange visits to museums and learning about topics such as Suffragettes. In summary, parents were keen to make this a more personal educational experience for their children.

Nevertheless, parents were in consensus that they would welcome support from Bradford Councils Children's Services, to assist them further in educating their children at home. Such improvement as requested by parents related to:

- Having a policy for Education Otherwise than at School (EOTAS) in Bradford, as parents educating their children at home, highlighted this an area of concern. Parents felt that they should be involved in the development of such a policy and more importantly, this would allow families to make informed educational decisions;
- To have educational subscriptions that are part of a package that children can use. For instance, a child in school may have access to "times table rock stars", "spelling shed", numbers etc through a school subscription and it would be extremely beneficial for a child being educated at home, to have access to such learning materials.
- Providing an educational resources library.
- Funding for taking GCSEs exams and an exam centre for home educated young people that is based in the Bradford district, as well as an acknowledgement from the Elective Home Education staff in Bradford Council's Children's Services, that young people may not wish to take all GCSEs at once in the manner in which young people attending school do. There was a view amongst parents that children educated at home should be allowed to take exams across a period of years if they wished.
- Realistic deadlines for the submission of annual reports.

Parents were of the view that Bradford Council's Children's Services should be supporting parents and children in providing the best educational opportunities for their children, irrespective of the modality in which it is delivered. However, during the information gathering process, it was heard that parents who were educating their children at home, were experiencing negative attitudes from education officers and healthcare professionals, especially relating to insinuations of safeguarding concerns and a level of scrutiny which is not applied to parents who choose to send their children to school.

Members also engaged with parents' groups and education charities in the areas of elective home education. One such organisation was the Education Otherwise Charity, who promote and support parents who educate their children at home. Representatives from the Education Trustee charity informed members of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, that they would like to offer free training to Bradford Council staff in relation to Elective Home Education.

Chapter 3 – Concluding Remarks

Throughout the course of this Scrutiny Review, Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee members have sought to take a balanced approach in its deliberations relating to this Scrutiny Review and aimed to ensure that this report encompasses the views and concerns of all interested parties.

The recommendations, if implemented, will further improve the approach that Bradford Council has in supporting parents who educate their children at home.

Bradford Council’s Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, will monitor future progress against these Scrutiny Review recommendations.

Recommendation 1

That, in the light of significantly increased incidence of persistent non-attendance at schools since the COVID pandemic, the Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Council’s Director of Children’s Services requests that the DfE reinforce, in guidance to local authorities supported by any necessary legislative change, the requirement to exercise their statutory duty to assure themselves that education is suitable and meets all of the educational needs, of children being educated at home. They should regard the move to home education as a trigger to conduct a review and satisfy themselves that the education provided at home, still constitutes a suitable education. The statement should then be revised accordingly to set out that the parent has made their own arrangements under section 7 of the Education Act 1996.

Recommendation 2

Bradford Council’s Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to receive a report back in 12 months, which monitors the progress against all the recommendation contained within this Scrutiny Review.

Chapter 4 – Summary of Scrutiny Review Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That, in the light of significantly increased incidence of persistent non-attendance at schools since the COVID pandemic, the Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Council's Director of Children's Services requests that the DfE reinforce, in guidance to local authorities supported by any necessary legislative change, the requirement to exercise their statutory duty to assure themselves that education is suitable and meets all of the educational needs, of children being educated at home. They should regard the move to home education as a trigger to conduct a review and satisfy themselves that the education provided at home, still constitutes a suitable education. The statement should then be revised accordingly to set out that the parent has made their own arrangements under section 7 of the Education Act 1996.

Recommendation 2

Bradford Council's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to receive a report back in 12 months, which monitors the progress against all the recommendation contained within this Scrutiny Review.

**City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council
Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Elective Home Education - Scrutiny Review

Terms of Reference

See Part 3E paragraphs 2.1 to 2.11 of the Constitution of the Council.

Background

At its meeting on Wednesday 9 October 2019, Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a programme of scrutiny reviews relating to Children's Services.

One of the agreed scrutiny reviews relates to including Elective Home Education.

Protecting Children's legal right to Education was discussed at the Council meeting on Tuesday 15 October 2019 and the comments and views raised by members will be taken into consideration during the course of this Scrutiny Review.

Context

Elective Home Education

Despite the term 'compulsory school age', education does not have to be undertaken through attendance at school, even though parents usually request a state-funded school place and the local authority is obliged to find one - or make alternative arrangements for education of your child. Parents not the state are responsible for ensuring that children of compulsory school age are properly educated.

Elective home education is a term used to describe a choice by parents to provide education for their children at home or in some other way they desire, instead of sending them to school full-time. This is different to education provided by a local authority other than at a school, for example for children who are too ill to attend school.

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- (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
- (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

Elective home education is a form of 'education otherwise than at school' and this piece

of legislation is the basis for the obligations of parents. It is also the starting point for local authorities' involvement.

Key Lines of Enquiry

The key lines of enquiry for this scrutiny review are to:

- Explore the proportion of home schooled children who are home schooled, because the child has not been allocated the preferred school place;
- Explore the approach where parents consider that their child will receive a better education at home, rather than school;
- Explore the proportion of children, which have been moved on by the school, into "Elective Home Education"; Review the safeguarding of children, who are outside the normal school system;
- Explore and consider the impact of COVID19 on school lockdown, as parents also choose to home educate their children.
- Evaluate the arrangements in place to support parents whose children are undertaking Elective Home Education.
- Consider the Special Education needs requirements of children in Elective Home Education.

Methodology

The committee will receive and consider a variety of evidence/information provided by a range of interested parties. The Committee may adopt one or more of the following methods to collect evidence/information:

- relevant documents;
- relevant data;
- written submissions from, or meetings with interested parties;
- interview key and relevant personnel;
- undertake relevant visits.

Indicative list of interested parties

An indicative list of interested parties is provided below. This is not definitive or exclusive and can be developed as the scrutiny progresses.

Organisation / Department	Contact
Bradford Council Executive Portfolio Holder.	Cllr Imran Khan.
Bradford Council.	Marium Haque – Children's Services. Sue Lowndes – Children's Services. Danielle Wilson – Children's Services. Rachel Phillips – Children's Services. Joanne Gleeson – Legal. Darren Minto – Safeguarding. Jane Booth – Safeguarding.
Local/Regional/National Organisations.	Police.

Organisation / Department	Contact
	Parents.

Indicative Timetable

Date	Milestone
Wednesday 15 January 2020.	DRAFT Terms of Reference to be presented to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee – for discussion and approval.
Wednesday 12 February 2020, Committee room 1, City Hall, 4.30pm.	Information gathering session – Setting the scene: Mark Douglas; Mariam Haque; Mark Griffen; Legal.
Wednesday 18 March 2020, Committee room 1, City Hall, 5.00pm – was cancelled due to the first COVID19 pandemic lockdown.	Information gathering session – safeguarding of children, who are outside the normal school system and engagement with Schools.
Tuesday 24 February 2021, Remote Virtual Session, 4.40pm.	Information gathering session – Setting the scene, (Mark Douglas, Mariam Haque, Sue Lowndes, Danielle Wilson and Rachel Phillips – Children's Services).
Wednesday 31 March 2021, Remote Virtual Session, 4.30pm.	Information gathering session – Safeguarding.
Wednesday 2 November 2022, Remote Virtual Session, 4.30pm.	Information gathering session – Parents.
Wednesday 24 January 2024..	Draft Scrutiny Review findings and recommendations to be presented to the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

First Informal Information Gathering Session - Thursday 12 February 2020, City Hall, Bradford

- Cllr Mike Gibbons, (Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Sinead Engel, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr David Ward, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Fauzia Raza, (Voting Co-opted Member).
- Mark Douglas, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Marium Haque, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Mark Griffen, (Safeguarding, Bradford Council).
- Joanne Gleeson, (Legal Services, Bradford Council).

Re-convening this scrutiny review, as a result of the COVID19 Pandemic

Second Informal Information Gathering Session – Wednesday 24 February 2021, Remote Virtual Session

- Cllr Geoff Winnard, (Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Julie Humphries, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr David Ward, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Ruth Wood, (Alternate Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Fauzia Raza, (Voting Co-opted Member).
- Joyce Simpson, (Voting Co-opted Member).
- Marium Haque, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Danielle Wilson, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Niall Devlin, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Sue Lowndes, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).

Third Informal Information Gathering Session – Wednesday 31 March 2021, Remote Virtual Session

- Cllr Geoff Winnard, (Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr David Ward, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Julie Humphries, (Member, Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Marium Haque, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Niall Devlin, (Children's Services, Bradford Council).
- Jane Booth, (Safeguarding, Bradford Council).
- Darren Minton, (Safeguarding, Bradford Council).
- Fauzia Raza, (Voting Co-opted Member).

- Joyce Simpson, (Voting Co-opted Member).

Third Informal Information Gathering Session – Wednesday 2 November 2022,
Remote Virtual Session

- Cllr Geoff Winnard, (Chair, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Mike Pollard, (Deputy Chair, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Jeanette Sunderland, (Member, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Margaret AliPoor, (Member, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Julie Humphries, (Member, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Andy Walsh, (Alternate Member, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Cllr Bob Felstead, (Alternate Member, Children’s Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee).
- Shifa Simab, (Co-opted Member).
- Thomas Bright, (Co-opted Member).
- Parents of Elective Home Educated Students.