

Support for children who are educated at home

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings from research conducted by the NFER for the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation into the support needs of home educators. Previous NFER research with local authorities (Kendall and Atkinson, 2006) showed that in local authorities where support is offered to have educators, information about different sources of support and how this can be accessed may be provided. Authorities and schools may also support home-educating parents so they can access flexi-school arrangements, school resources, curriculum advice and exam facilities. The current research focuses on the views of home educators. The findings reported are, in the main, based on detailed interviews with 20 home educators, although they are augmented by findings from other data collection exercises (an online survey and focus groups) where relevant. The sample of home educators was accessed through home education organisation and local authority representatives, and could therefore not include those who prefer not to engage with these bodies. Support was examined in its widest sense, including that from a range of sources: the home education community, the local community, family and friends, as well as local authorities.

Embarking on home education

- The decision to home educate was considered a difficult one partly because of a predominant view that all children were expected to go to school and because of some uncertainty/confusion amongst less informed parents over the legal aspects of home education.
- The initial stage was often accompanied by a lack of confidence, but seeing their children progress and having the opportunity to observe other home educating families helped overcome these initial difficulties.
- In contrast to families where parents had decided to home educate their children before they started school, parents who withdrew their children as a result of negative school experiences often had no time to plan in advance for home education and children had to be given time to recover from their negative experiences. This suggests that they might require greater support at this stage.
- Contact with other home educating families when embarking on home education was thought to help combat the sense of isolation that could be

experienced and to ensure that parents did not feel completely alone, particularly if their relatives were unsupportive in their endeavour.

- Approaches taken to home education varied from ‘very structured’ to ‘completely autonomous’ and a wide range of factors was considered influential in determining the approach taken. Intrinsic factors included the child’s needs and interests, parents’ religious beliefs and their own education and training. Extrinsic factors included the age-appropriate school curriculum, information gleaned from educational books and the opinions and experiences of other home educating families.
- It was notable that, when asked about the sources of support available when embarking on home education, a number of interviewees identified themselves or their spouse as the main resource. There was a sense that home educators were ‘proactive information and resource seekers’.
- The national home education organisations were the most frequently identified source of support in the initial stages of home education. They were seen as a source of moral support, providing reassurance that home education was both legal and possible, and provided information about deregistration and dealing with local authorities, as well as a means of communicating with other home educating families.
- Contact with other home educating families provided an important opportunity to share knowledge and experiences. They were reported to be an important source of information and ideas whilst the local groups were considered particularly helpful in providing access to organised activities for the children (e.g. sports) on a regular basis.
- There was evidence of inconsistencies amongst local authorities in their approach to home education. Some local authorities, once the decision to home educate had been taken, were reported to have been encouraging and helpful in directing parents to useful sources of information. However, there was a concern that many local authorities lacked sufficient knowledge about home education (particularly its legal status) and were often unsympathetic, rendering any contact a negative process. A more consistently understanding approach to home education was advocated.
- The internet and books were also highlighted as a significant source of help for those embarking on home education. The internet was commonly used by parents as a source of information on home education and as a tool for making contact with other home educating families. Both the internet and books provided access to educational resources and ideas about different approaches and curricula.

Sources of support for home education

- The findings indicate that home educators accessed a wide variety of different sources of support and that this varied with the approaches they adopted and their individual circumstances. There were some home educators who felt that they required no support, although they sometimes acknowledged that this might be helpful for others.
- The wide range of support identified included: the wider home education community/network; family and friends; local community facilities and groups; as well as local authorities, schools and other providers.
- The findings regarding sources of support provide further evidence that the decision to undertake home education is not taken lightly, since some parents choose to do so despite the fact that their friends, neighbours, relatives and, even, in some cases, their spouses, are unsupportive. Contact with other home educators might be more important under such circumstances.
- The wider home education network, including the national organisations, the local groups and individual families, were considered a key source of support. The national organisations pointed home educators to relevant resources and materials, as well as facilitating contact with other home educating families. Local groups provided an opportunity to share knowledge/experiences and for children to become involved in social and, in some cases, learning activities.
- There was a view, however, that some home education organisations and local groups did not address the needs of all families, since they were thought to support particular views or advocate particular approaches.
- There is the potential for home educating families to feel socially excluded in areas (particularly rural areas) where the school is regarded as the centre of the local community. In addition, home educators may be questioned by community members as to why their children are not at school and this can deter some from accessing the resources and facilities that they need.
- The library and the internet were highlighted as key sources of support for nearly all the families interviewed. Internet access provided a useful tool for home educators, not only in terms of accessing resources and materials, but also for finding out about home education in the initial stages and initiating contact with other home educators.

- The support available to home educators from local authorities (and from schools) varied considerably and the parents in the sample had varying degrees of contact with their local authorities. Some negative experiences were described but there were also those who described their local authority contact as a positive experience and one which had been helpful.
- Practical support from local authorities, for example, in the form of special tickets enabling home educators to take books out of their local library for extended periods or to access the school library service, was particularly welcomed by home educators. However, a number of parents chose not to access such facilities for fear of becoming known to their local authority. This may indicate that, if local authorities acknowledged the parents' right to educate their children at home, the potential for supporting home educators might be greater and the children's education enhanced.

Specific types of support

- Apart from access to specific information about the National Curriculum, home educators appeared to have no difficulty accessing relevant learning materials and activities for their children or accessing help with teaching and learning strategies.
- Families with children with special educational needs (SEN) had accessed SEN assessments, advice about specialist input to assist their children's learning and specialist therapies. They had done so in a number of ways: privately, through the national home education organisations, charities and local authorities. However, some reported that specialist input was difficult to access.
- Home educating families indicated that they accessed a wide range of external facilities, in particular those focused on sports facilities and museums/places of interest. These activities were often organised through local home education groups, enabling group bookings to be made and for them to access facilities at a cheaper rate.
- However, a few parents referred to the lack of sports facilities in their local area or difficulty accessing them because of transport problems. There was a call for sports activities on a par with schools to be made readily available to home educators, if not free of charge, at a subsidised rate. In some instances, it is possible that lack of access to external facilities might limit the learning opportunities available to home educated children.

- It was common for parents, either as individuals or as part of a home education group, to access museums and places of interest to support their children's learning. In one instance, a city museum has set up specific home learner days, in this way acknowledging home educators' needs.
- The importance of providing opportunities for their children to socialise was acknowledged by home educators and attendance at the local home education groups, in particular, were identified as an important source of social interaction for the children. However, the extent of activities provided by local home education groups varied from one location to another. Religious groups and local community groups were also identified as sources of social support, and were utilised either in addition to or instead of the local home education groups.
- Those parents whose children had left school suddenly as a result of negative school experiences stressed the importance of their children maintaining contact with their school friends.
- There seemed to be opposing views amongst home educators about the costs associated with home education and therefore about the need for support in this area. Those adopting a more autonomous approach thought there were minimal costs, whereas those adopting a more structured approach tended to highlight educational materials, tutors, course and examination fees amongst the additional costs.
- Whilst many home educators felt that financial support would be valuable, they thought that this would only be provided 'with strings attached', resulting in loss of freedom and flexibility with their educational approach. They believed therefore that the costs would outweigh the benefits.
- In addition to their lack of awareness with regard to the legal facts about home education, home educators believed that some local authorities were reluctant to acknowledge the legal right of parents to home educate for fear of promoting home education over school education. Legal matters were raised as an area where home educators could require further support.

Support for 14–19 year olds

- Some home educators felt that following GCSE courses and taking examinations were inconsistent with their approach, but others wanted their children to have access to these options. There were five out of the 20 families with chil-

dren undertaking GCSE courses in the sample and they were accessing these in a variety of ways, including correspondence courses and by attending further education (FE) college.

- The home educators interviewed talked about the costs associated with GCSE courses and the difficulties with undertaking coursework and accessing examination centres (which restricts the courses that can be taken). The need for independent assessment by a qualified teacher and problems addressing SEN were also raised.
- Variation in access to FE and adult education courses across the sample was evident and the lack of flexibility in the range of options available for this age group was highlighted. Home educators, for example, called for the opportunity for their children to undertake GCSE courses earlier or to undertake Open University (OU) courses before the age of 18 years. In addition, variation in access to examination centres or schools taking external candidates and to the option of flexi-schooling for this age range was also evident across the sample.
- Home educators reported that information regarding the options for this age group could be gleaned from a range of sources and access more specifically to relevant courses could be gained through FE colleges/schools and through the OU and the National Extension College (NEC) etc., as well as private tutors.
- Despite this, more information on the options available for this age range was advocated, together with financial support for the associated costs, in particular, with regard to undertaking GCSE courses and access to examination centres. Even home educators with children of a younger age said they were interested in exploring such options at an early stage.

Improving support for home educators

- There were mixed views amongst home educators about the adequacy of the support available. Whilst some (mainly those following a more child-led approach) felt themselves to be self-sufficient and others felt that there was support available from a range of sources, there were those (mainly those following a more structured approach) who felt that there was a general lack of support, particularly when embarking on home education.

- Specific areas where support was currently considered insufficient included: financial support; access to college courses; local authority support; information about structured curricula; access to science resources and examination centres.
- Obstacles to accessing appropriate support included: limited finances; lack of information or accurate information; negative attitudes towards home education; transport difficulties; accessibility of information about materials and resources available and information and access to examinations.
- By way of improvements, home educators not only called for financial support (even though there was some concern that this might be at the expense of educational freedom), but also for greater access to learning opportunities for their children and general raised awareness about the legal status of home education. They also called for more local authority staff with a home education remit and improved relationships between local authorities and home educators.

Conclusion and recommendations

The home educators identified a wide range of sources and types of support which they accessed. The findings indicated that they tended to be proactive ‘resource and information seekers’. They cited ‘human resources’, such as those in the home education community, friends and family, and the local authority as supportive. They also referred to community facilities, such as sports facilities and places of interest, and sources of information, such as the internet and books.

The study revealed the varied support needs of home educators, this being dependent on their approach to education, the age of the children and their individual circumstances. There was a diversity of opinion with regard to support. There was a dichotomy of views between those who adopted a more autonomous approach, who were vociferous in their lack of need for support, and some of those who adopted a more structured approach (particularly when children have left school in negative circumstances), who would welcome additional support. In addition, there was evidence that more support in the initial stages, when parents are embarking on home education, may be helpful.

The national home education organisations are the most significant source of support for home educators, providing a variety of types of support through their websites and newsletters, through local groups and, in particular, by providing a network of home education contacts. There was evidence, however, that they did

not always provide the type of support some home educators required, focusing in particular on specific approaches or adopting specific views that were not always shared by others. Are home educators' varying needs sufficiently accounted for and could new home educators be directed to the wealth of support available earlier?

Home educators' experiences of local authority (and school) contact varied. Some had negative experiences themselves or were aware of the negative experiences of others, making them reluctant to engage with their local authority. There was a view that local authorities could be lacking in knowledge and narrow-minded in their approach to home education. In contrast, there were those whose experiences had been positive, who found the support from the local authority valuable. In addition, the focus groups highlighted the scope for common ground and that there may be a greater willingness on the part of home educators and local authorities to collaborate than previously thought. There were inconsistencies in the amount and types of support different local authorities were able or willing to provide. How could more consistent support from local authorities be achieved?

A number of recommendations are detailed in chapter 8. Above all, local authorities and the home education community need to work together collaboratively and opportunities need to be provided for meaningful dialogue at all levels (i.e. nationally, regionally and locally).

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from research conducted by the NFER for the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation into the support needs of home educators. This chapter of the report includes:

- background
- methodology
- the structure of the report.

1.1 Background

This section provides background information about home education and home educators' support needs. It begins by setting the scene in terms of the current legislative and policy framework with regard to home education, before moving on to discuss the relevant literature regarding home educators' support needs.

1.1.1 Legislative and policy context

The following provides a brief overview of the current legislative context regarding elective home education, including parents' and local authorities' rights and responsibilities.

The 1996 Education Act (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1996) states 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.

(Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 7)

In Scotland the terminology of the Education (Scotland) Act (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1980) is slightly different in that parents must 'provide' education rather than 'cause the child to receive' it and 'by other means than attending a public school' rather than 'otherwise'.

Parents have a legal responsibility for their child's education. In the UK, education is compulsory for children aged five to 16, but schooling is not. Thus, parents can choose whether to educate their children at school or 'otherwise'.

Furthermore, Section 9 of the 1996 Education Act (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1996) states that children should be educated in accordance with parental wishes:

In exercising or performing all their respective powers and duties under the Education Acts, the Secretary of State, local education authorities and the funding authorities shall have regard to the general principle that pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.

If children have never been registered at school there is no legal requirement for parents to inform local authorities that they are educating their children at home. Parents who wish to remove their child/children from a school roll in order to home educate, must inform the school in writing of their intention to do so. The school is required to remove the child's name from the register on receipt of this notification and inform the local authority within ten days of the removal (Education [Pupil Registration] Regulations 1995 Section 9). This differs in Scotland, where there is a requirement for *consent* to be obtained before withdrawing a child from school rather than a need to *inform*.

As outlined above, parents have to ensure that they are providing an 'efficient' and 'suitable' education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. 'Efficient' education has been defined as an education which achieves what it sets out to achieve (DfES, 2005). A 'suitable' education has been defined by case law as:

- to prepare children for life in a modern civilised society and to enable them to achieve their full potential (Harrison and Harrison v Stevenson 1981).
- [an education] that primarily equips a child for life within the community of which he is a member, rather than the way of life in the country as a whole, as long as it does not foreclose the child's options in later years to adopt some other form of life if he wishes to do so (R v Secretary of State for Education and Science, ex parte Talmud Torah Machzikei Hadass School Trust 1985) (Sauer, 2005).

Under the 1996 Education Act (GB. Parliament. HoC, 1996, section 437 to 443) local authorities have a duty to act if it appears that ‘*a child of compulsory school age in their area is not receiving suitable education, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise*’. If a local authority believes that a child is not receiving a suitable education the local authority has a duty to serve notice on parents requiring them to satisfy the authority that the child is receiving such an education. If a parent fails to satisfy the local authority that the child is receiving a suitable education and ‘*in the opinion of the authority it is expedient that the child should attend school*’, the authority can issue a School Attendance Order requiring the child to become a pupil at a school named in the order.

Local authorities have no legal requirements to carry out monitoring of elective home education and have no rights of entry into a parent’s home. Local authorities do have a right to act if they believe that children are not receiving a suitable education.

In terms of the policy context, the DfES has recently commissioned some small-scale studies in this area. The most recent, published in 2007, focused on exploring the feasibility of a national survey of local authorities and home education organisations to ascertain the prevalence of home education in England (Hopwood *et al.* 2007).

1.1.2 Literature on the support needs of home educators

Home education can be enhanced by accessing support and resources to meet learners’ educational and social needs. Fortune-Wood (2006) maintains that finding quality support is a key factor in both deciding to, and continuing to home educate. This section will review some of the recent literature and research available in order to synthesise what is currently known about the sources and types of support, and the adequacy of support available to home educators.

The main sources of support used by home educators appear to be local and national home education organisations; other home educating families and local networks; local council facilities, such as libraries; resources, such as the internet, books and learning materials; and community groups, activities and public resources (e.g. Fortune-Wood, 2006; Williams, 2000; Arora, 2006). In some instances, other sources of support are identified by home educators, including: tutors, local authorities, schools and colleges (e.g. flexi- and part-time access).

According to Fortune-Wood (2006), the types of support offered by local and national home education organisations include: providing contact lists and access to local groups; legal advice; information about different approaches and styles of home education; information about affordable resources; assistance with liaising with the local authority; learning resources and information about examinations and qualifications. Home education support groups are often accessed as a first port of call for parents exploring and beginning home education as they provide moral support, reassurance, ideological support and recognition of home education as a viable alternative to mainstream schooling, as well as information about the practicalities of home educating (Barson, 2004; Arora, 2006; Russell, 2005). According to Barson (2004) home education support groups offer communities of practice whereby new families initiated into home education learn the discourses and practices of that community. In order to sustain membership to the community, the benefits must outweigh any compromises. As home educating families grow in confidence and develop their own approach, the need for such support groups may become lessened or altered, though such groups can remain a source of support for socialisation. The internet, books, learning materials and community and public resources are also accessed by home educators to aid, enhance and broaden children's learning experiences.

In some instances, home educators engage the support of tutors to teach areas of learning that parents are less able to cater for (Russell, 2005). The literature reviewed also suggests that some home educators receive support from local authorities and schools, though the extent of support appears to be variable (Fortune-Wood, 2006; Russell, 2005; Welsh, 2000). Support from authorities is often provided by a particularly committed and helpful individual, especially where the authority has a department dedicated to supporting home education. In local authorities where support is offered to home educators, information about different sources of support and how this can be accessed may be provided. Authorities and schools may also support home educating parents to access flexi-school arrangements, school resources, curriculum advice and exam facilities (Arora, 2006; Kendall and Atkinson, 2006).

The literature suggests some possible areas of inadequacy in the support available to home educators that would be usefully explored by further research. The literature alludes to an inadequacy in the support available for home education from local authorities; poor support for parents of children with special educational needs and a lack of available appropriate support in the early stages of

embarking on home education (the latter two may also inadvertently relate to inadequate support from the local authority). In addition, support to enable home educators to access affordable resources and examinations and qualifications appeared to be lacking.

A report by Welsh (2000) explored Scottish local authorities' approaches to working with home educating parents and sought the views of local authority officers, home education organisations and reviewed existing literature. The report revealed that authorities are often not a major source of support to home educators and that home educating parents are more likely to seek information and advice from home education organisations and other families. As part of the report, the written information local authorities provide to home educators was evaluated and found to be of poor quality, misleading, lacking in information and referral to relevant sources of support. It often conveyed a school curriculum view of education inappropriate to home learning environments. Few authorities were found to have a written policy outlining an approach to working in partnership with home educating parents. The report suggested the need for improved policy guidance for local authorities on supporting and dealing with home educators, recommending some 'good practice' guidance should be made available. The Standards in Scotland's Schools (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2006) Act provides guidance on establishing good relationships with home educating parents, including guidance around acknowledging diversity, providing clear information and practical support and resources.

In researching the experiences of home educators, many authors have documented the early stages of exploring home education as a time when parents feel insecure, anxious and lacking in confidence (Fortune-Wood 2006; Barson, 2004; Russell, 2005). The early stages of deciding to and embarking on home education appear to be daunting and the stage at which most support is required. The literature suggests that decisions to home educate are broadly based on moral and ideological views and dissatisfaction with the education system (Barson, 2004; Thomas, 1998). Parents' need for support may be distinctive according to their reasons for and route into home education (Arora, 2006). For instance, Barson (2004) reports how some families who accessed national home education organisations for initial support found their individual needs and circumstances rendered the support available inappropriate.

Arora (2003) raises questions about whether the support available for parents educating children with special educational needs at home is adequate. The article suggests that home educators have poor access to educational psychologists and Arora called

for the remit of the service to be broadened to include support for learning taking place beyond the school. More broadly, in a recent article in 2006, Arora found that home educators wanted more support from education experts to assess whether their child was making progress, free and easy access to resources and easy access to advice about specific educational problems as and when they occurred. Some home educators also appeared to need greater support to access affordable resources, curriculum materials and qualifications and examinations (Fortune-Wood, 2006; Russell, 2005).

The current research aims to add to the picture of the support available for home education. It examines the support available to home educators holistically and seeks home educators' own views about whether they feel sufficiently supported in home educating their children. By focusing on a case-study approach, it provides illustrations of the varied approaches and circumstances of home educators, and highlights the interconnectedness of their differing needs and the types of support they access. In addition, the inclusion of focus groups provides an opportunity for bringing together the key home education stakeholders (home educators, home education organisations and local authorities) for discussion of the issues and to identify potential ways forward.

1.2 Methodology

The research had three overarching aims.

- To identify the common and differing concerns of the home education community and education authorities.
- To identify the support needs of homeeducated children and their educators.
- To identify perceptions and examples of appropriate practice in support of home education and areas where support could be improved.

The methodology included four elements.

- Orientation interviews with a small number of home education organisations and local authorities.
- The main body of the research: detailed interviews with home educators and additional interviews with their children and others identified as being considered a 'significant' means of support.

- An online survey providing an opportunity for home educators more widely (and others) to give their views about their support needs.
- Focus groups involving home educators, representatives of home education organisations and local authorities.

1.2.1 Orientation interviews

By way of an introduction to the issues involved in this study, an initial phase was carried out involving telephone interviews with a small number of key personnel. These included nine representatives (national and local) from six different home education organisations that are involved in offering support to home educators and five local authority representatives with strategic responsibility for home education. The national home education organisation representatives were selected to include all the main home education support organisations and to cover national and local representation (where this was possible). Local authority representatives were selected (mainly from those involved in the previous NFER study on home education (Kendall and Atkinson, 2006)) to include different types and sizes of local authorities and to include those where previously reported to have developed effective working relationships with local home educators. The findings from this phase were used to inform the interview schedules used in the main data collection exercise (the detailed interviews with home educators).

1.2.2 Detailed interviews with home educators

The main part of the research comprised detailed interviews with home educators. The home education organisations and local authorities involved in the initial phase were asked to suggest parents who would be willing to be involved in this phase of the study. One of the key messages conveyed by the home education organisations and by the home educating parents in the initial contact period was that all home educating families were different. Taking this into account, although the initial plan had been to select a small number of families from those nominated to be included as case studies, the research team decided to include all those willing to be involved in the study. Detailed interviews (approximately an hour long) were therefore conducted with 20 home educating parents. Eleven of those involved were nominated by home education organisation representatives and seven were nominated by local authorities. The remaining two were nominated by home educating parents already interviewed and were suggested specifically by

these parents for adopting a contrasting approach to their own. It was important that at least half or more of the home educators involved were nominated by the home education community in order to try to avoid a significant bias towards those favourably disposed towards local authorities. Parents were given the option of conducting the interview over the telephone or face-to-face. Nine of these interviews were conducted face-to-face and 11 were conducted by telephone.

One of the common themes throughout this study was that many of the home educators interviewed stated that all home educating families were different and could not be categorised neatly into different types. However, it is necessary to examine the circumstances and reasons behind home education as a context and background to understanding their support and resources needs as these will vary with differing circumstances. Appendix 1 therefore provides information about the sample of home educating families involved in the study. As noted earlier, those who were interviewed were nominated by home education organisation and local authority representatives and, as such, were suggested in the knowledge that they would be likely to participate. The findings therefore cannot represent the views of those antipathetic to the research and, as such, is unlikely to include those who have had an unsatisfactory experience of home education, or those who choose not to engage with home education organisations, local authorities and researchers.

Shorter interviews were also conducted with the children/young people in six of the families and, in the few cases where they were identified, interviews were also conducted with key people who had been sources of support to home educators. Five interviews of this nature were conducted and they included local authority staff, subject tutors and a museum curator. These additional interviews have been used mainly to inform the case studies.

1.2.3 The online survey

A short online survey was made available more widely to the home education community (and others) via the NFER and one of the national home education organisation websites (other national home education organisations declined to display the link but were willing to refer people to the survey). This was included to add further weight to the representative nature of the research by opening it up, as far as possible, to the home education community as a whole. It was available for a period of approximately three months. The survey included 11

questions which were mainly closed in nature, although respondents were always given an ‘other’ option where they could provide additional responses. The survey elicited 103 responses. Responses were analysed and the findings have been integrated into the report where relevant, mainly as a broad introduction to some of the sections. Whilst respondents sometimes criticised the online survey for not allowing sufficiently detailed responses, the aim was to gather more detailed information through the home educator interviews.

1.2.4 Focus groups

Finally, two focus groups were conducted, one in London and one in York. Focus groups were attended by home educator interviewees from the previous phase, home education organisation and local authority representatives who had been interviewed as part of the initial phase. In total, at the two focus groups, seven home educator interviewees (including two students), five home education support organisation representatives and five local authority representatives were present. Key points raised by the findings from phase two were used to construct questions which were posed to focus group participants, alongside supporting findings. Discussions were recorded, summarised and analysed. The findings from the focus groups have been incorporated throughout the report where relevant.

1.3 The structure of the report

The report findings are set out as follows:

- Embarking on home education
- Sources of support for home educators
- Types of support
- Support for 14–19 year olds
- Improving support for home education
- The case studies
- Conclusions and recommendations

2 Embarking on home education

This chapter of the report presents the findings from parents' responses to questions focused on their experiences of when they first embarked on home education. It covers:

- how easy or difficult is it?
- approaches to home education
- sources of support
- further support that would be useful at this stage.

2.1 How easy or difficult is it?

The majority of parents interviewed expressed mixed views about their experiences of embarking on home education, with some maintaining that it had been easy and some that it had been very difficult. According to some of those interviewed, the decision to home educate was a difficult one because the predominant view was that all children were expected to go to school. Some parents were uncertain about their legal rights to home educate and this created additional stress. The initial stage was often coupled with a lack of confidence, but many maintained that, after a period of time, seeing their children progress had been a vital factor in boosting their confidence and reaffirming their decision. Opportunities to observe other home educating families working effectively were reported to support this process.

Whether embarking on home educating had been easy or difficult appeared to be dependent on a number of factors, in particular, parents' reasons for home educating, the availability of support (particularly from other home educators) and the characteristics of the children and the parents, as well as the approach.

Parents who had decided to home educate before their children started schools often maintained that this was a natural continuation of caring for their child, that it was 'instinctive' and, therefore, easy. In contrast, where children had been withdrawn from school in response to negative school experiences, parents described embarking on home education as being very difficult and some

described feeling isolated at this time. There was also a view that these children had to be ‘deschooled’ and had to be given time to overcome their negative experiences. It was suggested that other educational services (e.g. the educational psychology service) were unlikely to be supportive at this stage since they advocated that children should attend school. Where parents had thought about home educating for a long time before they actually withdrew their children, they had the opportunity to plan and were therefore better prepared.

Parents who had no contact with other home educators in this initial period described a sense of isolation. This was sometimes further compounded by the lack of support from their immediate family. According to some, positive contact with the child’s previous school (e.g. via the provision of resources or materials or the child’s attendance at specific classes), was reported to have helped combat the sense of isolation, ensuring that parents did not feel completely on their own.

The educational history and occupation of the parents was also cited as an influential factor. Those parents who were trained teachers, for example, had experience of adapting approaches for different children and of evaluating different materials (although one secondary teacher had reservations because she was not a trained primary teacher). It was also noted that adopting a more structured approach and having a timetable at the beginning had facilitated the process for some parents. In one instance, for example, buying-in a course of lesson plans and books had proved beneficial in providing a structure and giving the parents confidence. In addition, some parents also maintained that it had been easy in the first instance because their children were young and learning the basics. Where children were keen on learning this was also reported to have facilitated the process.

2.2 Approaches to home education

This section identifies the types of approaches reported to be used by home educators and the factors which have influenced their choice of approach.

2.2.1 Types of approaches

To assist with analysis, parents’ descriptions of their approaches to home education were grouped under four broad overarching terms and placed into the group it was felt they best fitted (although, in reality, it is recognised that many of the approaches adopted could involve a combination of these). A brief description of

each approach is provided, together with the number of families adopting each approach in brackets.

- ‘Structured’ approach (4): one in which parents described adherence to a regular timetable of pre-determined lessons.
- ‘Child-led’ approach (5): one in which parents described following the child’s interests but where they were directed to activities associated with those interests.
- ‘Semi-structured’ approach (8): one in which parents described a combination of time allocated for pre-determined lessons coupled with time focused on the child’s interests.
- ‘Autonomous’ approach (3): one in which parents described allowing children to learn naturally and where they were not directed to particular ‘learning’ activities.

A semi-structured approach appeared to be the most common amongst the sample, whilst only three of the home educators interviewed adopted a fully autonomous approach. It was common, however, for parents to become less structured as time went on. One parent, for example, expressed the view that he/she felt the need to be seen to be conforming to school hours at the beginning, and only later became more confident in being able to justify their use of time. The three parents who followed an autonomous approach, advocated that learning was a natural process and that children pick things up outside of a formal learning situation.

2.2.2 Influences on approach

A wide range of factors were cited as influential in determining the approach parents took to home educating their children: the children’s needs and interests; the school curriculum; educational books; parents’ own education and their religious beliefs; as well as other home educating families.

The child’s needs and interests were noted to be a primary concern in determining the approach to be undertaken. This is not surprising given that one of the reasons often proffered for home educating was to provide a more individualised approach. Motivation was considered a key element and a focus on project work was common. Many of the home educators also described having to adapt their approach to the needs of different children, for example, a focus on life skills for a child with SEN rather than the more academic approach adopted with the other children or adopting a hands-on approach with a child who was considered to be a less willing reader.

Parents were usually aware of the age-appropriate school curriculum and some reported trying to incorporate this into their approach. At the same time, they often felt it was important to acknowledge that home education was not school and, although following the school curriculum at the beginning, they often adapted this as time went on.

Other intrinsic influences on their approach included parents' own education and training and their religious beliefs. Three of the home educators were trained teachers and they stated that they therefore had teaching experience and had ideas of their own. One parent, coming from a business background, reported that he/she had adapted a business model and this had involved a focus on the skills required for learning (e.g. memory skills) and the setting of goals. According to another, as a result of adopting a creationist position, his/her approach tended to be more interactive.

Other extrinsic influences included other home educating families, home education organisations, local authorities and books. Other home educators' opinions about approaches were sought on home education websites and observation of other home educating families appeared to have been particularly influential. Observing an autonomous approach, for example, had made one parent realise that he/she did not want to adopt this as a model. Reference was also made to information about different approaches on home education organisation websites. The local authority had also been influential in two instances. According to one parent, questioning by the local authority had made her feel as though she should have a set curriculum in place. Other parents had utilised or adapted approaches to education or models that they had read about in books.

2.3 Sources of support

It was notable that, when asked about the sources of support available when they embarked on home education, a number of interviewees identified themselves or their spouse as the main source of support. They suggested that to be a home educator you had to be self-reliant: 'You have to rely on yourself.'; 'I got through on my own.' There was a sense that you had to be a 'proactive information and resource seeker'. These home educators felt they did not get much support from elsewhere, suggesting that some might have valued more support at this stage (see section 2.4). However, there was a view that, with the numbers of home educators increasing and greater availability of information, support was becoming

more easily accessible. A wide range of sources of support were identified, mainly: the national home education organisations; books/the internet; other home educating families/local groups; and local authorities.

2.3.1 National home education organisations

The most frequently identified source of support in the early stages of home education (highlighted by almost three-quarters of the sample) was the national home education organisations. They were also noted to be the main source of support for four of the parents sampled. Home education organisations were reported to provide information (e.g. about the legal aspects and deregistration, as well as resources and approaches) and an insight into the experiences of other home educators, which was often considered reassuring at this stage. Their internet lists and message boards were reported to be particularly helpful. They also provided a means of communicating with other home educating families and information about local home education groups (see section 2.3.3). In two cases, parents had also received support from home education organisation representatives when liaising with local authorities.

However, those newly embarking on home education did not automatically share the views of the home education organisations. Two home educators, for example, both of whom had withdrawn their children as a result of negative school experiences, commented on the negative attitude of home education organisations to a more structured approach.

I couldn't find anything that really said this is a great thing to do. There were lots of websites that I came across that were quite subversive. They obviously had personality clashes with headteachers and were doing it [home education] because they hate teachers. There were lots of websites I found where kids had been bullied but there was nothing really that was quite neutral and seeing it as an equal option with school, without any values added to it.

Home educator

2.3.2 Books and the internet

Over half of the interviewees in the sample cited the internet and over half also cited books as a form of support. Three parents cited the internet as their main source of support and some stated that it would be difficult to manage without

this. In contrast, at least one parent appeared reluctant to use the internet, although his/her son was developing expertise in this area.

The internet was commonly used by parents in the initial stages as a source of information on home education and as a tool to make contact with other home educating families or local home education groups (through home education organisation websites, bulletin boards, and internet discussion groups). The internet provided a mechanism through which families were able to provide, as well as receive, valuable information, guidance and moral support. Another primary purpose of the internet was as a tool to access educational resources and a source of information and ideas about different approaches and curricula (including the National Curriculum). The breadth of information and immediate access was stressed and often compared favourably with accessing library resources (see section 3.4). It was also reported to be useful for finding out information about SEN, locating specialist resources and specialist support. However, there was also a view that the resources available on the internet were limited and tended to be geared towards younger children.

Books were mentioned as a source of information about different educational approaches and curriculum packages, as well as resources to use with the children. Those on a low income (noted by some as an inevitable result of home educating) stated that they often used second-hand books which they obtained from charity shops or jumble sales. Resources from internet auction sites (e.g. CDs, DVDs) were also commonly accessed. In addition, catalogues, curriculum fairs and exhibitions were reported to be useful for finding out about the educational resources available.

2.3.3 Other home educating families/local groups

Over half of the sample identified other home educating families and local groups as an important source of support in the early stages (three considering them their main source of support). Contact with long-term home educating families and those who had encountered similar circumstances as themselves was considered to be particularly helpful, since this provided an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences. It was considered especially reassuring to be able to observe other home educators' children's progress. One parent described how observing the maturity of other home educated children reinforced her decision to home educate. Since a lot of materials and resources were reported to be avail-

able, their opinions on the resources they had used were also of particular value. They were also a useful source of other types of resources, such as tutors, specialists professionals, specific programmes or curriculum packages. Local groups, which were reported to be increasing in number, were thought to be particularly helpful in providing activities for the children on a regular basis, e.g. trips, PE, drama (see section 3.2).

2.3.4 Local authorities

The local authority was identified as an important source of help in the early stages by just under half of the home educators interviewed (one noting it as one of their main sources of support). Some families found the local authority officer with responsibility for home education to be encouraging, as well as a useful source of information and contacts (e.g. home education organisations), ideas and guidance (e.g. resources). In one instance, the local authority contact had had a marked positive impact, being the first person to be ‘one hundred per cent positive’ about the parent’s plans to home educate. In another, local authority guidance had given the parents confidence in what they were doing. In addition, local authority representatives had sometimes acted as useful moderators, suggesting to parents that they were doing too much in terms of detailed planning and timetabling (this may reflect a possible sample bias towards those highly motivated to home educate their children).

In contrast to these positive experiences, however, there were examples of parents who reported having negative experiences in their first contact with the local authority and its involvement was sometimes viewed with suspicion. There was a concern that many local authorities lacked sufficient knowledge about home education (particularly its legal status) and were often unsympathetic, rendering any contact a negative process. In addition, it was noted that their idea of resources was sometimes limited to text books and photocopies. Where children had had negative school experiences, there was a view that they needed to avoid ‘official’ contact with education at this stage.

In addition to the key sources of support identified above, parents also identified a number of other sources of support that had been useful in the initial stages, including children’s previous schools (e.g. providing access to resources, facilities and particular lessons or courses) and specialist professionals (e.g. subject tutors and specialist SEN staff providing specialist expertise). Friends or family

were also reported to be supportive (e.g. providing encouragement and directing parents to resources), although (as noted in section 2.1) there were amongst the sample those parents who had encountered antagonism from their extended family regarding their plans to home educate. Other forms of support may become more significant in such circumstances.

2.4 Further support that would be useful at this stage

Almost half of the parents interviewed thought that home educators were resourceful and that further support at this initial stage of home educating was unnecessary. Some held the view that the establishment of a support network could result in over-prescription, something they were trying to avoid. Support could therefore be seen as ‘interference’ by home educators. However, there was an acknowledgement that others, particularly those who may be less confident, might find some support useful.

Seven of the parents, including those who had chosen home education for philosophical reasons as well as those who had opted for home education as a result of the child’s negative school experiences, thought that further support from the local authority might be useful. Overall, their view was that a more open-minded and understanding approach to home education on behalf of some local authorities would be beneficial. They felt that, once a child was deregistered, a local authority visit could provide an opportunity for discussion about the child’s needs and could also provide an opportunity to pass information on to parents about home education organisations and local home education groups. One parent, particularly concerned about being stopped by the truancy patrol in the early stages, noted that some local authorities had provided home educators with identity cards in order to address this.

It was also suggested that ‘like-minded’ home educating families (i.e. those who adopt a similar approach) could befriend others to reduce the sense of isolation in the early stages. One parent stated that, rather than just offering advice, the provision for a representative of the home education organisation to which they were affiliated to attend a meeting with the local authority would have been helpful. A few parents identified more specific information that would have been useful for them in the early stages, such as curriculum information and information about resources for dyslexia.

3 Sources of support for home education



Online survey: The most significant sources of support

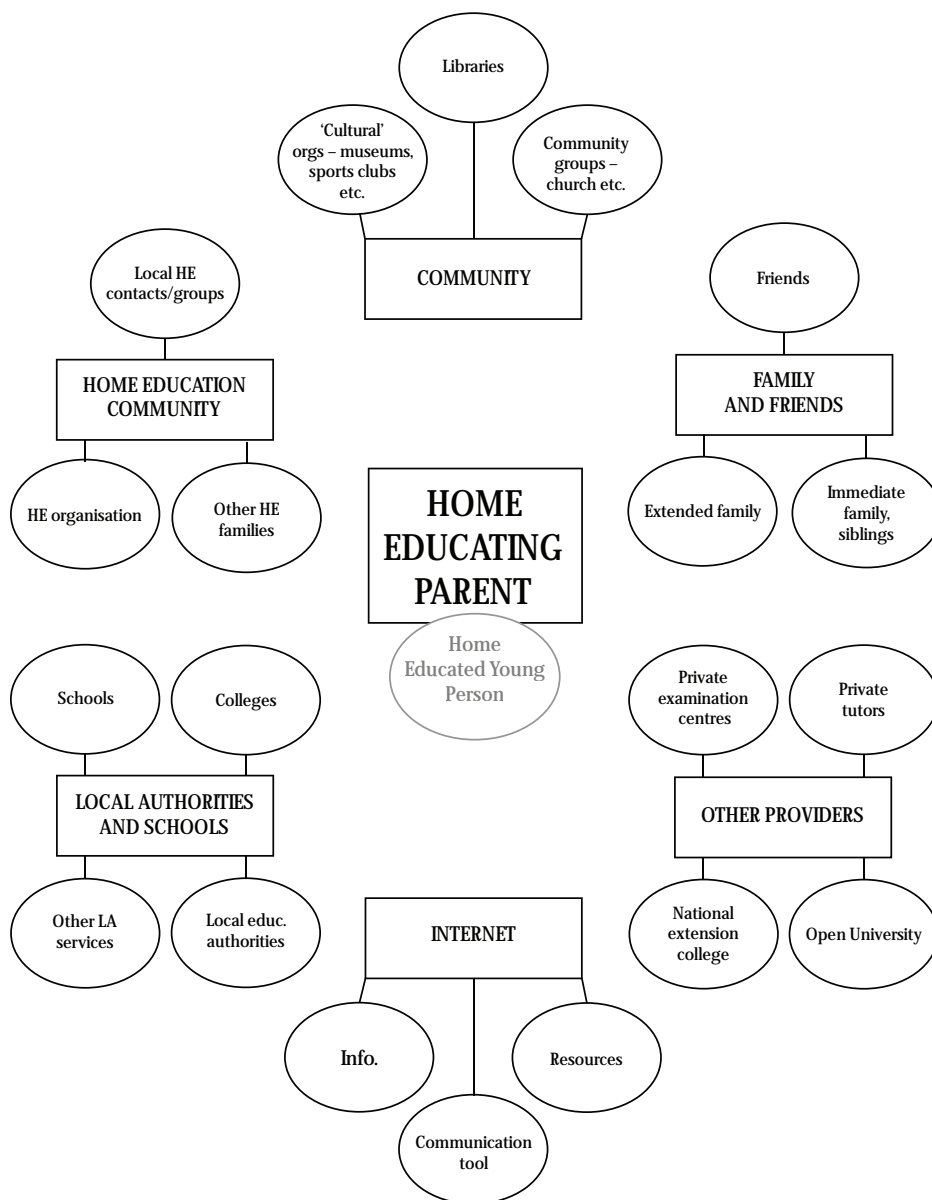
In the online survey 77 home educators ranked the most significant sources of support available to them. They rated the home education community, including peer home educators (26 per cent), local home education organisations (18 per cent) and national home education organisations (13 per cent) as the most significant sources of support. This was followed by the internet (nine per cent) and the wider family (seven per cent). Other sources also noted by a few respondents included the library, the local community and local facilities. It was notable that, within the online survey, local authorities did not feature until respondents were asked for the fifth most significant source of support and then were only nominated by two respondents.

This chapter describes the sources of support accessed by home educators.

The interviews with the 20 home educators indicated that they accessed a wide variety of sources of support and that this varied depending on their approach to education and their individual circumstances. The range of support sources is illustrated in Figure 1. The sources of support identified by the interviewees reflected those highlighted by the online survey and included, in particular, the home education community, family and friends, and the wider community, as well as the library and the internet. However, the local authority appeared to feature more highly as a source of support amongst this group compared to the online survey sample (perhaps reflecting that some of the parents had been nominated by local authorities and therefore a good home educator–local authority relationship might be assumed in these instances).

It is important to note, however, that there were some who felt that they required no support, although they acknowledged that this might be helpful for others. This corresponded with a vociferous minority (approximately ten per cent) of home educators who completed the online survey, who felt they required no support.

Figure 1 Resources and support for home education



This chapter provides details of the various sources of support the home educating families in the main sample used. These included:

- the immediate and wider family
- the home education community
- the local community and religious groups
- the local library and the internet
- local authorities and schools.

3.1 The immediate and wider family

Of the 20 families involved in the research, home education was generally undertaken by one parent/carer, usually the mother, but, in one case, a father and in another case a grandmother. Whilst six of the 20 families were single parent families, others reported that the other parent/carer was in paid employment and, as such, had less time to spend supporting their children's learning.

There were several instances where interviewees reported both the immediate and wider families to be unsupportive and not accepting of the decision to home educate. In these instances interviewees spoke of feeling isolated and unsupported, lending further support to the fact that undertaking home education is not a decision taken lightly and that external support, particularly from other home educators, may be important in some instances.

Where parents/carers other than the main home educator did provide support, they did so in two main ways. They undertook activities with the children, particularly in specialist areas (e.g. a software engineer assisting with IT) and areas in which the main home educator felt less confident. They were also a source of support to the main home educator, being someone with whom they could discuss approaches, activities and ideas. Siblings also provided support in the form of social interaction with the children and help with specific areas of learning (e.g. piano lessons). In some instances, they also provided 'child care', for example, older children looked after younger siblings or would occasionally assist their access to evening classes (where they needed to be accompanied by an adult) if the parents had other commitments. On the whole, interviewees acknowledged that the wider family were more likely to provide practical sup-

port rather than anything formally to do with learning. However, there were examples of grandparents providing specific activities for children (e.g. gardening and cooking). This type of input was considered beneficial in that the children spent time with other adults and learnt specific skills, as well as giving the main home educator a break.

3.2 The home education community

Home educators had contact with the home education community at a variety of levels: through national organisations, local groups and individual families.

Nearly all of the families involved in the study were either members of **national home education organisations** or had accessed resources and information from them. They found out about these through general web searches, other home educating families or through the local authority. The main way in which these organisations offered support was by providing information about and access to resources and materials. They signposted families to other sources of information, as well as publishing and producing their own resources. Age-specific websites provided information about resources aimed at children in certain age groups. They were also a vehicle through which families were able to receive recommendations about resources from other families (particularly via bulletin boards and message boards). In addition, these organisations facilitated large-scale events for families (e.g. conferences and holidays). However, as noted previously (see section 2.3.1) there were a few parents who felt that the national organisations did not address their needs.

The majority of families had, at some point, attended a **local home education group**. They were made aware of these through the national organisation publications and websites and via other home educating families. Whilst some interviewees, particularly those living in urban areas, described how there were several groups available to them, there were those, mainly in rural areas, who reported having difficulty accessing local groups because of distance and transport issues. Whilst several of the parents were regular attendees (i.e. attending at least one or two groups each week), other families did not access them a great deal, although they did comment that it was helpful to know they existed. The nature of the groups varied, some involving structured learning activities for the children and others having a social function. Local groups provided information, moral support and enabled families to share their expertise and ideas. They pro-

vided an opportunity for both the children and the parents to socialise, and, where organised, to engage in other activities (e.g. visits to places of interest, workshops or activity days). Some also provided access to ‘human’ resources, for example, where the parents paid for and organised tutors with particular subject expertise or the parents provided these themselves.

However, the organisation and approach of some of the local home education groups did present difficulties for some families, often reflecting the different approaches adopted by home educators themselves (e.g. an autonomous versus a more structured approach) or the nature of a child’s difficulties (e.g. SEN). In addition, there was a view that local groups did not pay attention to the needs of older children.



Focus group data: The differentiation and signposting of support

There was a view that, although the first port of call for most home educators, support from local and national home education organisations and local support groups is not always sufficiently differentiated and signposted. It was felt that it does not take into account the varying reasons for, and approaches to home education, nor the support needs of home educators at different stages. However, the danger of support becoming too differentiated and fractured was also raised, suggesting this would not be conducive to the needs of those embarking on home education who require a broad introduction. The signposting of home educators to relevant information was also felt to be the responsibility of the local authority, who could provide more localised and professional information if needed. significant source of support and then were only nominated by two respondents.

Half of the interviewees indicated that they had regular contact with **other home educating families**. This was more common for those living in urban areas, but even those in more rural locations, where other home educating families did not live close by, spoke about the need to travel to meet up with other families. Contact was also made via the telephone or the internet. Occasionally, some parents talked about making or receiving visits from other families they had met over the internet or at organised home education events. The type of support received from other home educating parents included: emotional and moral support; information on learning approaches/activities; information on curricula, knowledge of events and activities available in the local area; as well as recommendations regarding materials and experienced private tutors.



Illustration: Social activities

In one family, parents felt that it was particularly important, when their only son was younger, that they provided opportunities for him to socialise with other boys. The family got together with another home educating family, with two boys who only lived a few miles away. They came to the family house once or twice a week and they did project work or activities together. The main home educating parents took turns to teach the children, giving the other parent some free time and also saving on planning time. As a result of this contact their son was also introduced to a local scout group, thereby providing him with an opportunity to socialise further.

There were parents, however, who did not feel the need to meet up with other home educating families, commenting that contact was sporadic and more likely to be limited to telephone calls once in a while. Some pointed out that approaches to home education could be very different (e.g. autonomous versus structured; differing attitudes to discipline) and that other families were often not 'like-minded'. Other parents, particularly those whose children had previously been to school, commented that their children socialised with other friends regularly (who were not home educated) and therefore they did not need to mix with other home educators. These families tended to have a more structured approach to learning and did not find meeting with other home educating families to be as beneficial.

3.3 The local community and religious groups

A small number of home educators discussed the support they received from their local community (e.g. moral support from friends/neighbours and access to community facilities – see section 4.4), and from their local church.

Interviewees commented that some members of their local community were very inquisitive about home education. Several parents stated that, while out in the local area during school time, they had been questioned by members of the public as to why their children were not at school. One interviewee reported being reluctant to access public facilities on weekdays as a result and these experiences may suggest that some families are restricted in their access to facilities/resources. In addition, it was evident that, where the school was the focus of the local community (particularly in rural areas), there was the potential

for home educators to feel socially excluded. However, some added that, the longer they had been home educating, the more confident they and their children became at responding to such challenges.

Several parent/carers interviewed commented that the faith groups they attended were a source of support for home education. This included both moral and practical support (e.g. child care), as well as the involvement of children in activities/tasks concerning the church and social activities (e.g. Sunday school). In addition, some church groups also organised specific activities for home educated children (e.g. craft mornings, sports and social events) and, in some instances, church facilities were utilised for home education specific events (e.g. sports days and Christmas concerts).



Illustration: Religious groups

One family attended Jehovah's Witness meetings three times a week. In addition to worship, these meetings were felt to be particularly valuable in terms of learning, not only about the faith but also wider aspects of society. Children were told about the problems and issues young people may face and how to best address these. In addition, the Jehovah's Witness magazine covered a variety of topics, such as nature and history, and this was used by the family as teaching material.

3.4 The local library and the internet

Information access via the local public library and the internet were highlighted as a key aspect of support for nearly all of the families interviewed. The local library was considered easy to access (although mobile libraries were also referenced) and library staff considered particularly helpful. This provided access to computers and the internet for some families, as well as books and materials in other formats (e.g. audio books CDs, DVDs). Being able to borrow large numbers of books, particularly expensive curriculum materials, rather than have to purchase them was thought to be particularly beneficial (although, as mentioned in section 2.3.2, some families acquired second-hand and donated books). Libraries were also a source of ideas for some parents and library events were accessed by both parents and children. One parent, for example, had attended a talk by a representative from the Dyslexia Association.

At the same time, however, libraries were criticised for the restrictions on the length of short-term loans and the number of books, as well as the lack of textbooks and curriculum materials. The introduction of a special home education library card in one instance had overcome this issue, although it was also suggested that some home educating families may be apprehensive that local authorities might be able to identify families in this way¹. Another interviewee accessed the school library service and was able to borrow 30 books a term on a teacher's ticket.



Illustration: Home education lending library

One of the families with a particularly large quantity of resources of their own was, at the time of interview, in the process of setting up a home education lending library. The aim was to be able to provide home educating families with a box of books on a particular subject or topic area. The parent currently sent out resources requested by families personally by post but the plan was to extend this service and deliver resources throughout the country.

All the families in the study had used the internet to varying degrees. While the majority of families found the internet to be an invaluable resource, a small number felt that it was not essential. The internet was seen to be a valuable communication tool and information resource, particularly when parents first embarked on home education (see section 2.3.2). Schools, National Curriculum and examination board websites, for example, were accessed for resources and the internet was used by children to further the information gleaned from books. They were able to obtain up-to-date information or topic/project information that could not easily be accessed elsewhere. Where a fairly structured approach was followed, the internet was also used as a means of researching and purchasing curriculum packages and schemes of work (sometimes from abroad). In addition, it was also used to identify and purchase other educational materials. There were also instances of children accessing interactive learning websites and using the internet as a means of contacting other young people.

1 By law families do not need to deregister a child if they have not been to school and under the freedom of information act this information should not be shared by library staff.

3.5 Local authorities and schools

Amongst the sample there appeared to be three distinct groups of parents: those who had had no contact with their local authority; those who had had some initial contact; and those who had had ongoing contact with their local authority. There was evidence that the support received by home educating parents varied considerably across different local authorities.

Where parents had no contact with their local authority, this was of their own choice (some suggesting they had not informed the local authority of their decision to home educate). This tended to be the case in families with older children or where children had never been enrolled in school and also tended to be those who followed a more autonomous approach to home education. Other families reported that they had had a meeting with a local authority representative some time ago (e.g. two years), often when they started home educating (some commenting that this was a bad experience), and had no contact since.

In contrast, nine of the parents interviewed discussed the support they received from the local authority officer with a remit for home education. Most of these families, but not all, were those who had withdrawn their children from school and therefore needed to deregister – schools are then duty bound to inform the local authority. It was common for families to receive a half yearly or yearly visit. Whilst many of the families spoke about feeling apprehensive prior to a home visit by the local authority (many hearing of other families' negative experiences), they had found the visits and contact with the local authority to be helpful. For example, one parent, who opted for a structured approach, identified the local authority officer with a remit for home education (alongside friends and family) as one of the main sources of support at this early stage. Although the parent reported initially feeling wary of a home visit and believed that the officer would want the children to return to school, he/she stated that he/she had found the visit useful.



Illustration: Local authority support

During the visit to one family, the local authority home education representative undertook a profile on each child. He/she was able to objectively identify them as certain types of learner and to highlight the most appropriate learning activities for each child. This enabled him/her to reflect on how the children learn. The local authority representative, who

was an arts specialist, sent him/her resources through the post and also provided resources for his/her son to help with handwriting and literacy work. Specific websites and links to a church-based academy in England were also recommended.

Local authorities also provided practical support, in particular, by facilitating home education families' access to facilities. Throughout the study, this type of practical help seemed to be particularly welcomed by some home educators. For example, when one family found that children's access to the library was restricted to certain times, the local authority officer accompanied the family to the library, explained the family's circumstances and ensured that these restrictions were lifted. Similarly, in another instance, the local authority facilitated a child's access to a gifted children's summer school, from which he/she was reported to have benefited enormously. In some cases, local authority staff asked existing home educating parents to support new home educators. In addition, they sometimes provided home educating families with specific identity cards in order to avoid difficulties that might be encountered if they were challenged by truancy patrols.



Focus group data: Consistency of support from local authorities

The focus group data concurred with interviewee data in suggesting that local authority support for home education was inconsistent across authorities. There was a call for guidelines and training for local authorities, and the sharing of good practice amongst local authorities in order to reduce inconsistency and help them to provide support for home educators. Local authorities reported facing challenges in balancing their responsibility to ensure children are cared for adequately within their locality with parents' own rights and responsibilities.

There was also evidence amongst the sample of interviewees of very varied support from schools. Some schools provided support to home educators, for example, by providing access to resources, facilities (e.g. science laboratories), specific lessons (e.g. art classes or GCSE courses) and, in some cases, part-time or flexi-schooling (see section 5.2). In some instances, they had also provided more direct support for parents. A parent who had recently removed her children from a local school, for example, told how she had been invited by the headteacher to continue to participate in workshops provided by school staff for parents on supporting their children with particular aspects of the curriculum, such as literacy and numeracy.



Focus group data: The role of schools

The discussion in the focus groups suggested that there may be scope for schools to provide more support and resources to home educators, particularly via extended schooling and the greater emphasis this places on community-, rather than school-based, learning. Potentially schools and extended schools could provide access to examinations, short courses and classes and facilities, such as the gym and ICT. Some home educators, however, perceived risks and barriers to this relationship as they did not want to be known to, nor accountable to, the local authority.

The focus group discussions also highlighted that productive relationships between schools and home educators may provide opportunities for schools to learn from the individualised learning approach adopted by many home educators. Participants in the focus groups felt that, although schools provide different learning environments to home education, schools could adopt some of the principles of home education. There was a view that schools could move towards greater emphasis on learning, exploration and skills development, rather than administered and rote learning. Good practice in home education could be highlighted and the focus placed on the role of the teacher as a facilitator and a coach. It was also felt that schools could employ more peer support and collaborative approaches and structures to learning, with less emphasis on age segregation and demoralising age related developmental milestone expectations.

4 Specific types of support

This section focuses on the particular types of support accessed by the home educators.



Online survey: Types of support

Home educators responding to the online survey reported that they received the following main types of support: encouragement (55 per cent), legal support (49 per cent), material and resources (48 per cent), curriculum (30 per cent) and teaching strategies (24 per cent). Other types of support highlighted included subject support, exam contacts, SEN support, advice on assessment and financial support, as well as support with post-16 opportunities, college placements and work experience. At this point, a small but significant minority emphasised that they did not want this support to come from local authorities.

Although categorised in different ways, the specific types of support discussed by the 20 home educating families interviewed reflected most of those highlighted through the online survey, although 'encouragement' did not feature in its own right. They included:

- learning materials and activities
- teaching strategies
- SEN support
- external facilities
- social activities
- financial support
- legal support.

4.1 Learning materials and activities

For learning materials and activities, the majority of families cited books as a major resource. Parents purchased materials from specialist book stores, supermarkets, the internet, as well as borrowing a wide range of books from the library

(see section 3.4). Two families reported accessing age-specific and subject-specific school materials (e.g. worksheets) on the internet. A small number of families purchased set curriculum packages and schemes of work. Parents discussed the value of books published as a series in that they covered every year/level or a wide range of subjects. Three parents accessed schemes of work and materials direct from publishers. Audio books and books with lists of other reading material suitable for certain reading ages had been helpful. A few families had visited curriculum fairs and education shows (largely aimed at teachers and schools) to find out what resources were available. One parent highlighted how such fairs were useful in that they often acquired materials free. In a small number of cases, parents discussed using online interactive learning resources (e.g. an online maths module) aimed at school children. Educational software was also used, enabling children to learn more independently and to practise the skills they had learnt. In one instance, a family, whose children were interested in film making, used DVDs as a resource tool.

However, it was reported to be difficult to access National Curriculum information and some parents talked about password protected school websites which were only accessible to teachers. It was also reported to be difficult to obtain feedback from other home educators on the effectiveness of curriculum materials or courses. More support in these areas, particularly in the early stages of home educating, may therefore be helpful.

Some children were studying formal courses available from awarding bodies, such as Cambridge International and the National Extension College (NEC) (see chapter 5). Another family had acquired Open University (OU) course materials for their eldest child who was hoping to study humanities with them in the future. The materials purchased second hand from an auctions website were used to give the young person a flavour of the course and to provide the OU with evidence of his/her capabilities. Another family had accessed correspondence courses and online courses where materials for study were downloaded.

4.2 Teaching strategies

Families were asked if they had accessed any resources or support to assist them with teaching strategies. Many of those following a more autonomous or child-led approach did not feel the need for any particular teaching or learning

strategies, some suggesting that these would be inappropriate, because their approach was child led and discovery based. A few of the parents were trained teachers and they therefore felt they had the required skills, although one had found talking to other home educating families about strategies particularly beneficial. Other parents noted that they had received advice with regard to teaching strategies from other home educators, who, according to them, had often been teachers previously or had partners who were teachers. Several of the parents commented that they had read about educational approaches in books (see section 2.2.1) and had tried these out in practice. They found it useful to know about successful strategies that had been tried and tested.

4.3 SEN support

Some families with children with SEN had accessed SEN assessments and specialist input to assist with their children's learning. They had paid for private assessments, as well as accessing these via the local authority and charitable organisations. Assessments were reported to be helpful in highlighting particular learning needs. In one instance, a family had accessed an Irlens assessment for visual dysfunction, which they had found out about through the Aware and Autism Support Group. In another, an assessment had been carried out by a national charity to find out the best IT equipment to use with a child. In addition, a dyslexia assessment teacher, contacted through another home educating family, had also been helpful.

Parents had received advice about specialist SEN input through the national home education organisations, the local authority and through friends. Staff from the psychology service and the SEN department had sometimes provided this type of support for families. However, others had found specialist input difficult to access. In one instance, where a child had obsessive compulsive disorder, someone with experience of this provided advice via the home education organisation website. However, this parent thought the psychiatrist their child eventually saw was discriminatory as their view was that the child's depression was due to them being home educated. Another parent had received advice from a friend who worked at the early learning department with regard to his/her son's phonics needs, as well as accessing resources and information (when embarking on home education) via the internet (see section 2.3.2).

Four families had access to specialist therapies, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy, to help address their children's special

needs. In one instance, physiotherapy accessed through school was continued at home. In another, a family praised the flexibility of the pre-school assessment centre they attended for speech therapy and physiotherapy for a child with complex difficulties. However, one parent noted that the support they had received had been school based and, as such, the materials used by the speech therapist had not been appropriate.

4.4 External facilities

When asked about the external facilities used to support their children's learning, home educators commonly focused on sports/recreational facilities and museums/places of interest. Sporting activities and visits to places of interest tended to be a feature of the activities organised by local home education groups (see section 3.2). Through these groups, it was felt that home educators had 'the clout and critical mass' to be able to arrange activities that organisations might normally provide for schools, enabling them to book more easily and often at a cheaper rate.

It was common for home educators to have accessed public sports facilities and local sports clubs for a wide range of sporting activities (either as individuals or as part of their local home education group). In some instances, local leisure facilities were reported to have become a regular meeting place for home educators. Two parents stated that they had accessed out of school activities run by the local council (in the holidays or after school). In addition, it was noted that sports activities could be accessed through religious groups. Despite this, a few parents stated that accessing sports facilities could be difficult, either because of transport difficulties or because of a lack of facilities in their local area. One parent called for a full range of sports activities (similar to that available to children who attend school) to be made more readily available to home educated children (either free or subsidised).

It was also common for home educators to have accessed a number of different places of interest (e.g. museums, galleries, exhibitions) in order to support their children's education. Some museums were reported to run specific events and, in some instances, a visit to the local library was a weekly occurrence.



Illustration: Museums and nature events

One museum was unusual in that it organised specific home learner days (see case study 3). Another organised a weekly discovery club focused on history. It was noted that, with regard to museums, entrance

was now free. Nature events, such as days organised by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and projects through the National Trust, were also mentioned.

Other external facilities utilised centred on musical activities, such as private musical tuition, attendance at musical events and, in one case, attendance at the child's previous school for keyboard lessons. A few home educators talked about local community groups, e.g. youth clubs and Brownies.

4.5 Social activities

The importance of providing children with opportunities to socialise was stressed by some parents, and, in some instances, every effort was made for opportunities for children to socialise to be capitalised upon. In particular, those whose children had left school in negative circumstances stated that they thought it was important for their children to maintain contact with their school friends.

Over a half of the parents interviewed stated that they used the local home education group as a means of support for social activities (see section 3.2). In addition to the local groups, national and local home education camps and festivals were organised. National events reportedly attracted about 2000 families and these were thought to provide the children with reassurance of the existence of other home educators. In one case, a parent described how his/her son had made pen pals through the bimonthly children's page on a national organisation's website/newsletter. Some parents also mentioned church-based or religious groups as a means of supporting their children's socialisation (see section 3.3). Local community groups (e.g. youth clubs) were also noted as a beneficial form of social contact by a couple of parents.

4.6 Financial support

When asked about financial support, families discussed the associated costs of home education and the limitations of living on one income. Interviewees, particularly those following a more structured approach, cited the additional costs of educational materials (e.g. schemes of work, reading series, and curriculum packages), private tuition and course fees which most families with children at school would not incur. One parent also foresaw that those families wanting to

enter their children for examinations would incur significant costs (see section 5.1). Others, particularly those living in more rural locations, discussed the high travel costs associated with maintaining regular contact with other families and for educational trips. In contrast, however, there was a view, held mainly by those following an autonomous approach, that home education costs were minimal. One parent, for example, commented that they had ‘not gone out of their way’ to buy resources that they would not have ordinarily purchased if their child had been at school.

The majority of families reported that they had not received any financial support or subsidies to support home education. Some parents argued that they should be given the per-pupil funding allocated to schools or that the Government should follow similar funding approaches to other countries (e.g. the USA) where home educating families receive funding each year.

Every child at school gets a certain amount. Why can't we have that? We should be entitled to the same thing because, at the end of the day, we are going out and buying books and we are going out and buying paper and we go on trips etc.

Home educator



Focus group data: Financial support for home educators

From a local authority perspective, there was a view that local authorities had limited access to finance and resources with which to support home educators as the majority of funding is received on the basis of the numbers of pupils registered in schools. Hence, the need for national government support for developing this aspect of their remit was identified. There was a view that the local authority would have to know the numbers of home educators in order to be able to support home educators financially.

Other parents believed that it would be useful to receive special project grants and funding from charitable organisations, as well as tax benefits/relief. Yet, while some interviewees believed monetary support would be helpful, others had very strong concerns that it would lead to increased regulation and accountability on the part of home educating families, thereby outweighing the benefits of such funds.

Where families had received some financial support towards the costs of home education this included subsidised admission to places of interest (see section 4.4), as well as monies from a local church. Other families reported that their children (under 16) had accessed college courses free of charge and another family, prepared to liaise with the local authority, received a ten per cent discount off local authority educational resources.

4.7 Legal support

Parents reported that they referred to home education organisations (publications, websites and representatives), particularly when embarking on home education (see section 2.3.1), for information and guidance on the law relating to home education and what families were legally required to do (e.g. the need to, or not, inform schools and local authorities of their decision to home educate). Several families highlighted that they believed that local authority personnel had limited or factually incorrect knowledge of the law. Indeed, in some cases, parents believed local authorities deliberately withheld legal information about home education from families due to a fear that more parents might choose not to send their children to school.

One parent felt that an added benefit of membership to a home education organisation was that they have a ‘legal team’ or legal expertise and this support would be readily available to them. Another, trying to prevent what he/she deemed as an invasive psychological assessment being carried out on his/her child, had accessed advice via one of the national organisations through an ‘informal network’ of home educators with experience of the law. This parent now provides legal support to other parents via a support line. In contrast, there was a view that legal support was not widely available to home educators because it is a specialist area and that legal support from home education organisations was ‘ad hoc’ because advice was provided on a voluntary basis (due to lack of funding).

5 Support for 14–19 year olds

Specific difficulties were reported by the interviewee sample pertinent to home educating 14–19 year olds and it was therefore considered relevant to devote a separate chapter to this. This chapter therefore relays the findings with regard to the difficulties encountered with undertaking GCSE courses and examinations, the sources of support/alternatives available and further support which may be helpful for children within this age group.

5.1 Undertaking GCSE courses and examinations

Some home educators considered the undertaking of GCSE courses and examinations as inconsistent with their approach. However, others wanted their children to have the opportunity to access these options. Of the nine families home educating 14–19 year olds, five are undertaking GCSE courses. Of these five, the children in three families are studying GCSE correspondence courses, e.g. through the NEC and two of these are planning to take examinations. The child in one family is studying GCSEs post-16 at an FE college, whilst, in the remaining family, the children of secondary school age (e.g. 11–16 years old) have entered secondary education and, as part of this, they are undertaking examinations. Home educating families who had undertaken examinations did this mostly via specialist examination centres (for external and international candidates). Only one child had done so as an external candidate at a school.



Illustration: The National Extension College (NEC)

One child was undertaking GCSE courses via the NEC. He/she was provided with units of work, assignments, coursework and a tutor who marks assignments and provides individual feedback about learning and progress. The materials are written to Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) standard and the tutors are experts in the subject area and in supporting distance learning. The family paid for the NEC courses themselves; the approximate cost of a GCSE course is £290. The college admits children of any age group and offers GCSEs, International GCSEs and A-level courses (which can be studied without having a GCSE in the subject) as well as some other courses (e.g. bookkeeping). The NEC provides a list of examination centres that accept external candidates. It operates on similar

principles to the OU. As an open learning college, it is based on the philosophy that learning should be accessible to all and that there should be a range of ways to learn. If the tutor interviewed is typical, a considerable proportion of people involved in NEC are home learners. The NEC advertises its appropriateness for home education on their website alongside numerous links to other sites of interest for home educators. In this example, both the home educating parent and the NEC tutor spoken to felt that the external verification and feedback the young learner received as part of the courses helped to build self-esteem and confidence (see case study 1).

A number of specific issues were raised by home educators in relation to children undertaking GCSE courses and accessing examination centres.

- **Costs:** A number of interviewees identified additional costs associated with home educating 14–19 year olds, particularly if formally accredited courses, such as GCSE courses, are undertaken. Home educators may have to cover the costs of the GCSE course and the examination centre themselves. However, if they undertake GCSEs post-16 at FE college, this provision is usually funded (by the Learning and Skills Council).
- **Coursework:** Undertaking GCSEs with a coursework component was reported to be a challenge as coursework must be independently assessed by a qualified teacher. One interviewee commented that the local authority had advised them to keep all their project work as this could be used for GCSE coursework submission.
- **Accessing examination centres:** Parents reported restricted access to examination centres which, in turn, limited the types of GCSE courses available to their children. Some families were able to access specialist exam centres designed for external candidates, such as home educated young people and those with English as a second language. Accessing local schools to take examinations was considered very difficult, with schools either unaware of their capacity to allow external candidates to sit examinations or unwilling or unable to do so.
- **Meeting SEN:** A number of interviewees suggested that addressing home educated young people's SEN in order for them to undertake examinations was a challenge. Concern was expressed about how to receive extra time in exams

for special needs. However, anxieties were also raised about the implications of SEN assessments that invited authority personnel to make judgements about a young person's needs.

5.2 Sources of support/alternative options

Some families had accessed alternative options for 14–19 year olds. These included alternative courses through FE colleges and schools and through other avenues, such as the OU or the NEC. They also included the use of tutors for specific subject expertise and accessing work experience opportunities.

5.2.1 FE colleges and schools

Home educated 14–19 year olds were reported to have accessed local FE colleges as both under-16s and post-16, as a part-time, flexible arrangement and in order to participate in adult education classes. One child, aged less than 16 years, for example, was undertaking vocational courses at an FE college. This family had received support from their local authority advisor to access this provision, including the associated funding. Other young people were attending school or college on a part-time flexible basis (e.g. half a day a week) to receive support in a particular subject. A couple of families whose home educated children were not yet 14 suggested flexi-schooling was an option they were interested in pursuing if this meant the young person could access learning that was particularly difficult for them to provide (e.g. science experimentation). A range of adult education classes was also accessed to support 14–19 learning (including evening classes and attending FE college parttime). Where young people had accessed FE, experiences were positive, for instance, the home educated young people were deemed mature for their age group and were reported to do well in the environment.

However, the associated costs were again raised as an issue, as well as the following points:

- **Variable access to adult provision for under-16s:** Although some children had accessed FE provision at under-16, at least two families had been unable to do so. Similarly, some children had engaged in adult education classes as under-16s, whereas others had not been permitted whilst under age. This highlights further inconsistencies and suggests the need for awareness raising

amongst providers about the needs of home educators and for more equitable access. In addition, some families had difficulty accessing adult education provision due to transport problems.

- **Limited FE access for under-16s:** The point was made that the majority of FE courses available to under-16s tended to be those accessed by schools for disaffected young people. Concerns were therefore raised by some home educating parents about under-16s attending college being educated solely with excluded young people.
- **Entry requirements:** Some home educating families faced entry requirements to access further or higher education. In these cases, families were finding ways to meet these requirements, for instance, building portfolios, taking basic skills tests, getting the necessary qualifications or trialling second-hand versions of courses.

5.2.2 University

Two families were using the Open University (OU) to support educating 14–19-year-old home learners and other families had explored the OU as a potential route to continue learning. The families had purchased OU courses (e.g. second hand from auction websites) and used these as a structure for learning and gauging the ability and level of the young person. The OU was a valued resource and provided an effective means to progress into higher education. Some families advocated the need for more flexible entry to the OU whereby, if deemed ready, young people aged under 18 could embark on courses.

At least two young people from families in the sample had entered mainstream university having been home educated. In both instances the young people had taken GCSEs, followed by A-levels (one via FE college and the other attended sixth form college) in order to achieve the necessary entry requirements for university education.

5.2.3 Tutors

Tutors were identified as a further means of support for home educating 14–19 year olds and there were examples within the sample of these being accessed collectively by groups of home educators and privately by individuals. In two families, the young people learn alongside other home educated young people in tutored sessions. Such sessions may be delivered by a home educating parent with the relevant expertise or the parents may club together to pay for a private tutor.



Illustration: Tutors

One of the families spoken to had accessed local tutor group sessions set up by, and specifically for, home learners. The group was originally instigated by a home educating parent who had a desire for her children to learn alongside other young people rather than in isolation. He/she also felt, for children 11–16 years old (e.g. secondary school age), it was harder to support the higher level and breadth of learning. The groups gradually attracted more and more home learners and demand grew for this form of learning and support. Frequent sessions are now offered in different subject areas (e.g. maths, English, science and art). The groups are run in council facilities and families pay for the sessions they attend. The families employ qualified teachers to deliver the sessions, with the advantage that these professionals are aware of the level and syllabus that needs to be covered in order to take examinations at GCSE level. Although young people are able to study to GCSE level through tutored sessions they faced challenges in accessing exam centres and schools to sit examinations as external candidates. The tutored sessions are advertised via one of the national home organisation websites.

Employing private tutors was another source of support used by home educators of the 14–19 age range. In particular, private tutors may be used to teach the young person a subject that the home educating parents find difficult to teach to a high level, e.g. languages, or where the parents wanted the young people to experience learning with peers.

5.2.4 Other forms of support

Several home educating families spoken to were involved in researching and exploring career interests independently. There were examples, however, where home educators had been directed to the Connexions Service by their local authority advisor to discuss careers advice. In one instance, the local authority advisor responsible for work experience had helped a young person access a work experience placement and conducted preliminary health and safety visits on the family's behalf. Some young people were involved in part-time/holiday work or were volunteers. Overall, there seems to be a lack of information about external sources of support available to help arrange and access work experience opportunities.

In particular, when home educating 14–19 year olds, emphasis appears to be given to preparing for transition to adult education, employment and life and

learning with others. In terms of the transition to adult education, accrediting and demonstrating ability seemed to be a key focus, for instance in gaining qualifications, developing portfolios of work and experience and other awards, such as a gymnastics coaching qualification and Duke of Edinburgh awards. Home educated 14–19 year olds also seemed to be increasingly undertaking more independent and individualised learning. In addition, several families emphasised the learning of life skills for this age group.

Although deemed important throughout a young persons' home education, social support was also considered a particularly key feature of 14–19 provision, given the emphasis on entry to mainstream further and higher education, adult life and employment. Sources of support were often other home educating families, community social activities and school and college in some instances. Although seldom mentioned, one family had enlisted the support of the health services in meeting the needs of their teenage children, by providing sex and health education.

5.3 Further help that would be useful for 14–19 year olds

Interviewees' views about the further help that would be useful to support home educating 14–19 year olds focused on the need for more information and improved access and availability of support.

Families commented that they gained information about taking GCSEs and other exam and post-16 options from local and national home education organisations, from other home educating families, internet searches and local authority advisors. Despite this, a number of parents talk about the lack of coherent information and the lack of a clear picture of the options available for this age range. The incoherence of the knowledge available regarding exams and accessing further and higher education was highlighted by families' different experiences. For instance, there was considerable variation across the participants, with some under-16s able to access FE and adult education and school examinations and flexible access, and others not. Both those families with children aged 14–19 and those preparing for this phase advocated the need for more information on the options available for this age range. In particular, they called for clarity about how to undertake GCSEs and how to access examination centres and schools as an external candidate. They also called for improved information about how to access flexi-schooling, FE college (for both under-16 and post-16 provision) and the OU, together with support with associated costs.



Focus group data: Access to examination centres

Within one of the focus groups there was some discussion about how accessing examination centres is currently a very challenging area for home educators. It was suggested that this perception may be maintained by the lack of collective action on the part of home educators on the issue and that they tend to adopt routes already established by other home educators to gaining access, no matter how difficult they may be (e.g. travelling a long distance). It was felt that there needed to be a local solution and local authorities could signpost home educators better to examination centres which provide for external candidates. There was a local authority view that access to recognised examination centres for home educated children should not pose a problem and that this was something that the local authority should be able to arrange. However, concern was expressed that the coursework element of some GCSEs could lead to complications for schools and, as such, this issue might only be resolved by examination boards substituting an additional paper for the coursework aspect of GCSEs.

For some families there did not seem to be sufficient flexibility in the range of options available to them as part of 14–19 learning. Many families felt there was a need to improve the access for home educated young people to mainstream and adult education. They highlighted the need for better and more flexible access to adult education classes and open learning courses, FE college, the OU, and GCSE and A-level provision (e.g. by removing age restrictions). The need for more tutored sessions for home learners was also raised, given the level of expertise needed to educate this age group. Interviewees called for greater accessibility to exam centres. In addition, due to the increasing costs associated with home educating 14–19 year olds, the need for support with the costs of courses and exam centres was advocated in some instances (particularly pertinent given families varying experiences of the support available to under-16s).

Inconsistencies across local authorities and FE colleges were again highlighted and the 14–19 age range appeared to be an area where more support could be made available to home educators. Home educators in this sample received inconsistent support from the local authority; some were supported to access college places and funding, and others were not. There was also a perception, voiced by one interviewee, that local authorities had little power to influence things like provision for under-16s and so were of little help. This highlights the need for increased consistency and clarity from local authorities on the types of support they can offer home educators with children at this stage.

6 Improving support for home educators

This section examines home educators' perceptions of the adequacy of the support available to them, the barriers to support identified by parents and their suggestions on how support could be improved.

6.1 Adequacy of support

Among home educators there were mixed views as to whether the support available to them was adequate. Those who adopted a more structured approach to home education were more likely to conclude that the support available to them was inadequate and, conversely, those adopting a child-led approach were more likely to conclude that it was adequate. Where parents wanted to follow a structured curriculum, there was reported to be a shortage of support from home education organisations and other home educating families. Other reasons given for inadequacy of support varied: limited access and funding for college courses (see section 5.2.1); limited access to examination centres (see section 5.1); unsatisfactory support from local authorities (e.g. shortage of staff and sporadic visits); lack of science facilities (see section 3.5).

Although some parents found that the support available had met their own needs they perceived that support available to other home educating families may indeed be inadequate. For example, one parent, who was a qualified teacher felt she was more aware of, and able to locate educational resources than others without such experience.

In addition, some parents concluded that they would have liked more support when they first embarked on home education (see section 2.4). They reported that they would have welcomed support from other home educating families in their locality or to have received support in accessing services usually accessed through schools (e.g. SEN assessments).

I knew where to get the help if I wanted it by digging deep. For the average Joe Bloggs on the street there is just nothing, they are basically on their own. They have really got to know where to look. It's not in the public domain really, it's a case of knowing somebody who knows someone.

Home educator



Focus group data: Sufficiency of resources for breadth and balance

Participants in the focus groups advocated that the nature of home education is concerned with depth into topics and subjects, rather than breadth and balance. Accordingly, families tended to find ways to resource and support in-depth learning in the areas the learner is most interested and engaged by. However, given this highly individualised approach, there may be a need for a greater breadth of resources to support the areas of focus adopted by individual home education families. A broad range of support and resources needs to be available to support this individualised approach. For instance, some parents may appreciate enhanced access to science resources, sports facilities and arts and cultural learning depending on their children's interests.

Of the parents who found the support available to be satisfactory, some commented that this was because they were 'self-sufficient', i.e. able to access any necessary resources, help and information independently, as and when they required it. Indeed, some parents believed external support, particularly from the local authority, to be 'interference' and that accessing local authority services could create more problems for families (e.g. by leading to inspections). Some interviewees were therefore keen to acknowledge that they did not need any external help or support (as were a significant minority responding to the online survey, as noted earlier).

Others commented that the sources of support (detailed in chapter 3), particularly the presence of other home educating families in the locality, support from national home education organisations and local authority staff, as well as access to the internet, meant support available to home educating families was more than adequate. As one parent noted:

I don't think there has ever been a point where there was no one we could go and ask about a problem ... I don't think I have ever felt like we are out here on our own, we've hit a brick wall, I don't know what to do. I think we have always felt there is always someone we can email, phone, talk to or there's a place we can go to on the internet where we can find more information on something.

Home educator

6.2 Obstacles to support

This section identifies what participants felt were the main obstacles to accessing support for home education.



Online survey: Factors impeding support

Home educators who responded to the online survey felt that there were two main impediments to support: negative attitudes (24 per cent) and lack of understanding and knowledge (15 per cent), mainly by local authorities and government. Lack of resources (7 per cent) was also identified by a significant number of respondents. Other influential factors highlighted included: poor communications; lack of clarity of roles and restricted access to courses for under-16s and lack of financial support.

The majority of the 20 parents interviewed also felt that there were some obstacles to accessing support. These included, in rank order:

- **Limited financial support:** The absence of any government funding to support home educating families; limited resources to pay for materials and activities (particularly for families living on one income and single parents); lack of discount on educational materials (e.g. books and software) commonly offered to schools.
- **Lack of information/inaccurate information:** Inaccurate local authority information relating to home education and the law; schools' lack of knowledge about home education (e.g. entering home learners as private candidates in examinations). Awareness raising here would be helpful.
- **Negative attitudes towards home education:** Negative portrayals of home education by the Government and local authority staff (promoting the view that that children ought to/have to be educated in school); general public questioning of parents about why their children are not at school.
- **Transport:** Lack of transport, particularly for those living in rural locations created some difficulties (e.g. accessing evening classes).
- **Accessibility of information/resources:** Difficulty accessing resources and materials only available to schools/teachers (e.g. restricted websites); home educating parents not being informed about changes in educational policy or

procedures to the same extent as other parents; lack of recognition of home education nationally (e.g. vouchers for schools).

- **Examinations:** Difficulty accessing examination centres and lack of up-to-date examination information on examination board websites.

6.3 How support could be improved



Online survey: Improving support

When asked about improving the support available to home educators, respondents in the online survey focused mainly on enhancing local authority and government understanding of home education. The next most commonly identified aspect was the need for funding, without associated prescriptions of how home education should operate and having to replicate school outcomes. A smaller number suggested the need for access to GCSE courses and examination centres. A significant minority felt that support was adequate or wanted no further interference in home education.

This section presents the perceptions of how support for home education could be improved.

Throughout this report, parents' suggestions as to how support for home education could be further improved have been highlighted. For example, when embarking on home education, suggestions included more local authority support (e.g. greater understanding of home education and the provision of information about home education organisations and local groups) and the befriending of new home educators by established families. Suggestions of further support for families with older children included more information about, and greater access to, GCSE courses and examinations. When asked if support could be improved, many of the parents either reiterated these suggestions or suggested ways to overcome the obstacles identified (e.g. improved access to transport). However, they highlighted three key areas: financial support, access to courses for older children and issues concerning their relationship with local authorities.

6.3.1 Financial support

When interviewees were asked what further support they required, the most common response related to financial support. Interviewed parents suggested they

would like greater access to places of interest for free or at a reduced rate to the same degree as schools. In addition, that obtaining concessions should be made simpler as often discounted rates were only available to families if they were requested in advance and this was felt to be restricting. Other suggestions were to create a directory of places where home educators could receive concessions and for more places to be geared towards home educators rather than school groups. Families also commented that reduced costs of materials, particularly software, in the same way as schools received discounted rates, would be beneficial. One parent suggested that it would be useful if home educating families were VAT registered as a further way to reduce the costs of materials.

6.3.2 Access to courses for older children

Interviewees thought that greater access to courses, and the financial support to pay for these, could be ensured. It was also suggested that FE colleges could provide courses specifically for home educated young people rather than courses aimed at adults or disaffected young people. Along with college courses, they thought that other learning activities, such as summer schools or gifted and talented provision, or events run by museums and galleries specifically for school groups, ought to be opened up to home educators.

6.3.3 Local authority relations

Some of the families described ways in which the support from local authorities could be improved. There were calls from the parents interviewed for interaction between local authorities and home educating families to be more positive and for local authority staff to be more supportive (without appearing to be interfering). Some interviewees felt that both parties needed better information on the law relating to home education and that local authority staff needed to have a greater understanding of home education. For example, one parent described how it would be rare for a local authority inspector to understand home education because they do a nine-to-five job and are very likely to send their children to school. She commented: 'We had four weeks out in Scandinavia where we learnt more about history and culture but it would take an exceptional inspector to see that.' Another parent, who had a negative experience of the local authority, suggested that there ought to be a national agreement that local authorities do not appoint people who disagree with home education to such a post. Raised awareness of the legal status of home education, not only amongst local authorities, as also considered beneficial.

As noted previously, there appeared to be considerable inconsistency across local authorities in terms of the amount and type of support they were able to provide for home educating families. Although one parent found the support from his/her local authority to be beneficial, he/she recognised that other families in other parts of the country have had different experiences. This parent stated that, because there is no direct funding to local authorities for home educators, the post is usually picked up by an education welfare officer, school improvement officer or a retired headteacher working part time, which means there is no continuity of support. In his/her local authority the same person had been doing the job for five years and the officer had had time to build up resources and both the officer and parents are able to learn from each other. Yet this parent also indicated the potential hostility from other home educators to the notion of local authority support due to a belief in a hidden agenda.

In a small number of cases, families also felt there should be more local authority staff with a remit for home education, especially in areas where there was a large number of home educating families. Suggestions for greater access to local authority representatives (e.g. more visits and a phone line), as well as better relationships with local authorities, to prevent the ‘them and us’ divide, were seen to be important.



Focus group data: Local authority support

When participants in the focus groups were asked to identify the key messages they would like this research to convey, the following key messages emerged. They advocated that local authorities require training and statutory guidance on how to support and deal with home education. They thought that home education should be presented in local authority and school information as a valid and legal option and alternative to mainstream schooling and that the relationship between local authorities and home educators could be strengthened through consultation. Authorities should have access to funding and resources to support home education. Finally, focus group participants suggested that local authority support and involvement should be sufficiently flexible and differentiated depending on individual home educators’ needs.

7 Case studies

Introduction

From the 20 home educating parents interviewed for the main part of the study, six families were selected to provide more detailed illustrative case studies. These were selected to illustrate a range of approaches and circumstances, as well as to illustrate the utilisation by home educating families of a variety of different sources and types of support. They were often therefore those where more information was available on the sources and types of support they had accessed. The names of the families involved in the case studies have been changed to protect their identity.

Each case study includes a diagrammatic representation which illustrates the resource and support take-up of the individual case-study families. All the diagrams are set out on the same dual axis matrix. The vertical axis represents the continuum between structured learning approaches and autonomous learning approaches. The horizontal axis represents the continuum between institutional sources of support and informal sources. Thus, in this context, the local authority appears at the institutional end of the continuum, while the extended family would be at the opposite end. The size of each 'balloon' indicates very approximately the apparent relative importance of each item of support. Plotting these diagrams is clearly not an exact science. Sources are placed on each matrix according to the best judgement of the researcher, based on the interviews undertaken. These diagrams are meant to be indicative and illustrative and seek to show the range of ways in which resources and support can be marshalled to support differing intentions. Each diagram also includes a very brief summary of salient facts about the circumstances in which home education is taking place.

Each case study has been set out in the same format:

- background and context
- reasons for home educating
- educational approach
- embarking on home education
- support accessed
- adequacy of support.

A brief summary of each case study is provided.

Case study 1: The Smith Family

Jane is nearly 16 years old and was withdrawn from school as a result of long-term difficulties with experiencing feelings of panic and phobia. A major part of Jane's curriculum consists of maths, geography, biology, art, media, ICT, RE, history and world issues, for most of which a cross-curricular approach is adopted. Alongside this, Jane takes NEC sociology, history and English. The Smith family's most significant sources of support have been one of the home education organisations and the internet, as well as the NEC, although local authority support was significant in the early stages in reaffirming the decision to home educate.

Case study 2: The Davis Family

Mark is 14 years old and was withdrawn from school as a result of his older siblings' experiences of bullying and their consequently being home educated. Mark follows core subjects plus areas that are of interest to him. Mrs Davis's approach has become less structured since she only has Mark at home. The Davis family's most significant sources of support are the internet and the wider family network, although they have also had local authority support to access college and work experience.

Case study 3: The James Family

There are three children in the family (two girls and a boy) range from 10 to 15 years old. The parents decided to home educate because they felt that the school process 'homogenised' learners and from a desire to spend more time with their children. Their approach was described as 'a balance of reasonably structured with a capacity for autonomy'. The James family's most significant sources of support are the internet, the library, a museum and other local community facilities.

Case study 4: The Harrison Family

There are six young people in the family, ranging from 15 to 28 years old, all home educated. The family have been home educating for 25 years. The two youngest children, aged 15 and 17, are still receiving home schooling. Home education was a result of dissatisfaction with local schools and their approach to learning. An autonomous approach initially, but, over the years, a greater degree of structure, particularly with the youngest children. The most significant sources of support accessed by the family include the national home education organisations and tutor groups set up through local home education networks.

Case study 5: The Donaldson Family

Lee is nine years old and home education was motivated by a lack of school support for the child's needs. It focuses on the basics, maths and English, plus experiential learning through projects. The most significant sources of support for the Donaldson family have been the tutors who have been accessed for particular subject areas and a small city farm.

Case study 6: The Coleman Family

The children in the family range from 11 to 21 years old. The family have been home educating for 16 years. Parents' own negative experiences of school provided one of the main motivations for their children to be home educated. Their approach to education is described as 'entirely autonomous'. One of the national home education organisations and the internet have been the most important sources of support for the family.

Case study 1: The Smith Family

Background and context

Jane is nearly 16 and lives with her parents in an urban area. Jane's mother had worked as a primary school teacher. Initially, Jane's father found the moves towards home education as problematic as he did not experience or understand the problems Jane faced with school. As the home education experience has progressed, he has become totally supportive. The decision was taken not to tell the immediate family about educating Jane at home as Jane's mother predicted opposition from them, rather than support. As a result, the move towards home education has been 'a go it alone thing'.

Reasons for home educating

Since the latter stages of her time at primary school, Jane began to experience feelings of panic and phobia. Jane managed to continue attending school (to various degrees) for two years. Jane's mother continued to support her daughter whilst at secondary school, including, for example, waiting in the car park whilst Jane followed a reduced timetable. Hence, a flexible approach was followed, involving Jane attending school for several hours, then returning home with work to complete, with special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) support. Professional input was provided, chiefly in the form of educational psychology, although this was not seen to have been effective. Jane's mother contends that the line pursued by these professionals focused on striving to get Jane to attend school as this was 'the thing she must do'. As a result, both Jane and her mother's anxiety increased. As a final effort, she created a cognitive behavioural therapy programme for her daughter, containing gradual steps to encourage and support school attendance. However, it was finally realised that the situation was not going to be resolved:

It was not what the psychologist said; 'you must continue this [attending school] or you will not have a life'. It was; 'My God. If she does continue this, [anxiously attempting to attend school], she won't have a life.

Home educator

Mrs Smith points out that the final decision came from Jane herself as she had wanted to continue trying to attend school. Hence, school attendance was said to have ‘just fizzled out from March a couple of years ago to her being deregistered in the July’. At the same time, she had been using the internet to gather background information on alternative forms of education for her daughter.

Educational approach

Mrs Smith suggested that their approach to home education is not as structured as some that she has read about as Jane is not told what work to do, how long to spend on each task and how many hours a day to spend working. However, she also notes that there is more structure than in some cases: ‘Someone saying to their child “You can play guitar all day” would think of it [our approach] as structured’. Educational opportunities and experiences are also provided through courses followed through the NEC.

Embarking on home education

Difficulties encountered at the beginning included the attitudes and approaches of professionals, with, for example, the educational psychologists being determined to promote, and focus on, the pursuit of school attendance. In addition, Mrs Smith also notes that support from teachers at the school was variable during the lead-up to her daughter engaging in full-time home education. Some teachers provided work for her to do, whilst others were less forthcoming.

Despite these problems, some initial sources of help and support were available. The family therapist proved to be a useful source of support, especially in terms of addressing the feelings of guilt that Mrs Smith had about her daughter’s problems in accessing school. In addition, Mrs Smith contends that the need to address Jane’s psychological state prior to focusing on her educational experience and development was paramount. The local authority representative proved to be highly supportive in this. ‘He was 100 per cent supportive about educating at home.’ The positive attitude of the local authority representative is said, by the mother, to have been ‘amazing’, although she also notes that the lateness of his initial visit (seven months after Jane had been deregistered) might preclude any practical support with the setting up of home education. This was attributed to lack of sufficient resources for supporting home education within the local authority.

Practical assistance came from home education organisations, especially the information derived from one organisation’s website. Information regarding the mechanisms and processes involved in re-registering sections of GCSEs was identified as having been of particular use. Mrs Smith comments that the ‘[national organisation name] site and their information is absolutely brilliant’ and had already provided the family with a good knowledge of home education opportunities before the local authority representative visited. In addition to practical support, access to the website has facilitated the development of knowledge and understanding of other people’s experiences. This has led to a degree of reassurance for Mrs Smith, through being in contact with people ‘who thought it was not weird to not attend school’.

Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the Smith family are illustrated in Figure 2.

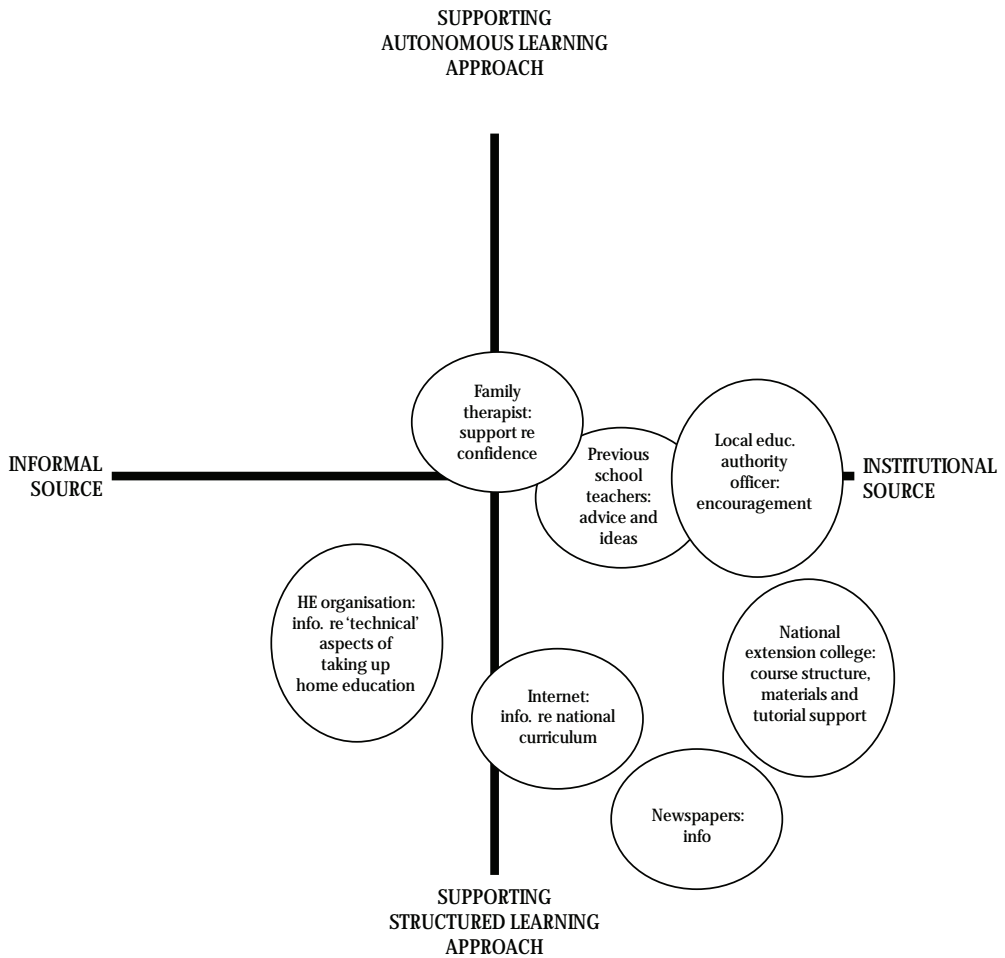
In terms of supporting learning, key sources of information have included the internet and the Independent, the national newspaper. The internet has enabled Mrs Smith to identify age-appropriate National Curriculum work for Jane to do, whilst at the same time, both sources have enabled Jane to follow topics of particular interest. The range and quality of information on the internet is said to have supported and enhanced the use of other materials, such as published study materials.

A major part of Jane’s curriculum consists of maths, geography, biology, art, media, ICT, RE, history and world issues, for most of which a cross-curricular approach is adopted. Alongside this, Jane takes NEC sociology, history and English. Attempts were made to pursue educational activities through several extension colleges, although these were generally seen to be unsuitable – one because of the predicted level of involvement from the college in the family’s situation. The family thought that this was going to be too much like school and therefore not suitable. Mrs Smith notes that the NEC was seen as offering the best and most appropriate support for Jane. The educational packages available, coupled with the approach of specific freelance tutors, are seen as meeting Jane’s educational needs:

You get an amazing package, four massive files [one file per subject] with the whole of the NEC curriculum in it and there are topics and units with assignments plus coursework ... you send it to the tutor, who marks it.

Home educator

Figure 2 The Smith Family



Withdrawn from school: experiencing feelings of panic and phobia. Main home educating parent an ex-teacher. Started structured, becoming less so.

The GCSE history course consists of 15 assignments with a view to completing an AQA exam as an external candidate at a local school or college at the end of two years. The NEC supplies students with a list of possible centres. The outside involvement is seen as particularly useful, so that Jane gets the input and perspective of people other than her mother. Outside endorsement of the work she completes is seen as particularly beneficial and the flexibility of the approach is seen as contributing to its effectiveness. For example, assignments can be passed between students and tutors via email or by post. Jane likes receiving post so this is their preferred method of communication.

Despite the facilities available to sit exams through the NEC, Mrs Smith does not envisage her daughter, at this stage, sitting the exams for the four GCSE courses she is pursuing. 'Going into school to take exams with people she does not know is asking too much.' The NEC had sent the family a list of possible exam centres, although there had been difficulties in securing schools' agreement. Similarly, the tutor recognises the difficulties Jane faces in attending a venue to sit exams.

In terms of opportunities for social interaction, Mrs Smith is aware through one of the national organisation websites that some home educators do get together in groups, although she and Jane have not pursued this route. In the early stages of home education, Jane had found it useful to talk to other children through the organisation, although, as her confidence has returned, she has made friends with young people attending school, whom she sees socially.

Adequacy of support

In terms of additional help that would have been beneficial in the early stages, Mrs Smith was surprised at the school's lack of experience and understanding of the situation. Indeed, the school's SENCO has since used the experience and lessons learned from Jane's situation to assist another child at the school.

I could not believe that no one could understand what she was experiencing. It took us a year to convince the SENCO that Jane was not putting it on.

Home educator

In addition, for the local authority to provide meaningful support at this stage, she thinks that an initial visit would need to follow shortly after deregistration and that local authorities therefore need sufficient 'manpower' focused on home education to ensure that this can be achieved.

Mrs Smith feels that access to exam centres is an area that could be improved. Home invigilation is said to be offered in a limited number of cases through the OU, although it is expensive.

Mrs Smith suggests that support for home educators could be improved if awareness and promotion were increased. This was raised in relation to her experiences of the educational psychologist's approach to Jane's situation. The freelance tutor also notes that increased awareness of organisations, such as the NEC, could improved home educators' situations as he/she feels that this information may be hard to access through schools.

Mrs Smith also raised access to funding to facilitate the increased use of resources as an issue. She feels that the funding received by the school could be allocated to home educators, although she believes that the 'strings attached' to this would outweigh the financial benefits. Mrs Smith is able to stay at home and support Jane's learning, but she notes that other young people may not have this advantage as their parents may need to work. 'You cannot stop your job. Outsiders are not going to support you financially.'

Case study 2: The Davis Family

Background and context

There are three children in the household. The two older siblings, now aged 21 and 19, both came out of school in year nine. The youngest child, Mark, came out of school just after his siblings, when he was seven years old and has now been home educated for seven years. The family live in an urban environment, and although they are aware of other home educators in the area, do not generally interact with them.

Reasons for home educating

One of the eldest children suffered bullying whilst in year nine and, according to the family, there was no suitable alternative provision (the offer of a tutor for one hour a week). This child was therefore removed from school. The second eldest child then became the focus of bullying at school and she also became home educated, despite wanting to remain at school, because of the family's concerns over her safety. At this time, the youngest child no longer wished to attend school as his sisters were staying at home.

Educational approach

Initially, Mrs Davis's approach to education was characterised by a significant degree of structure. This was deemed appropriate, at the time, because of having to manage three children of different ages who were being educated at home. Once the two eldest children finished their home education, the approach became characterised by a greater degree of autonomy for Mark.

All the children pursued maths, English and science. They decided that the children would 'study a little bit of everything', so that, if they did ever want to return to school, they would have the required background knowledge. As the home education progressed, the parents decided to follow the children's interests and concentrate on the core subjects plus others: 'Whatever takes their fancy at the time'. Their approach was also underpinned by a perceived need to focus on 'learning to learn':

One of the things that they have to learn when they come out of school is how to learn because at school it is all done for them but when they came out it was like; 'we don't know the answer, we will have to find the answer, how are we going to do it?'

Home educator

Initially, the parents sought to teach their children in the same way that they themselves had been taught at school, although over time, their methods and approaches have changed, developing their own teaching and learning styles to suit the children and the environment. This is seen as an interactive process whereby the children and their parents have learned together, the process having become easier as time has progressed.

Mrs Davis aims to keep Mark above the standard expected for his age through teaching him herself. They follow the core subjects, along with other areas that he expresses an interest in. There is not a rigidly structured timetable in place, although the week's education is generally ordered so that particular subjects are pursued on specific days. Within this, there is flexibility so that additional time can be devoted to a specific topic, especially if Mark is having difficulty in fully understanding it. Mrs Davis sees this as being a particularly important aspect of home education.

Embarking on home education

The process of instigating home education for their children did not prove to be as difficult as the parents had originally anticipated. They suggested that they 'threw themselves in at the deep end' and purchased revision/study aides with which to teach their children. The family used the experience of home education to 'get back to basics', for example, by improving their grounding in English. The internet proved to be an essential means of support, providing access to a greater range of resources than the initial book-orientated approach.

The family feels that they were very much on their own and developed their own approach to home education. Mr Davis contends that initial visits and input from the local authority did not support the family's decision to home educate, and as such, were not useful. However, as time progressed and the family became further involved in home education, the monitoring visit that occurred after four or five months was seen as a turning point. This provided an opportunity for discus-

sion with the local authority about sources of information and guidance, providing them with reassurance and confidence that they were ‘on the right track’: ‘It was like having someone coming in and actually turning out to be a friend and that was the take-off point really.’ A key element was the realisation that they were delivering ‘over and above’ what was required for their children. Hence, in addition to the confidence boost, this allowed or prompted the family to re-assess their approach to home education. As a result, a more relaxed and more flexible stance was taken and the whole family derived a greater sense of enjoyment of home education after this point. The local authority continued to conduct biannual monitoring visits and the family also contacted the local authority, on occasion, via email. No other sources of help were accessed, and the family does not see that any particular support or guidance was lacking.

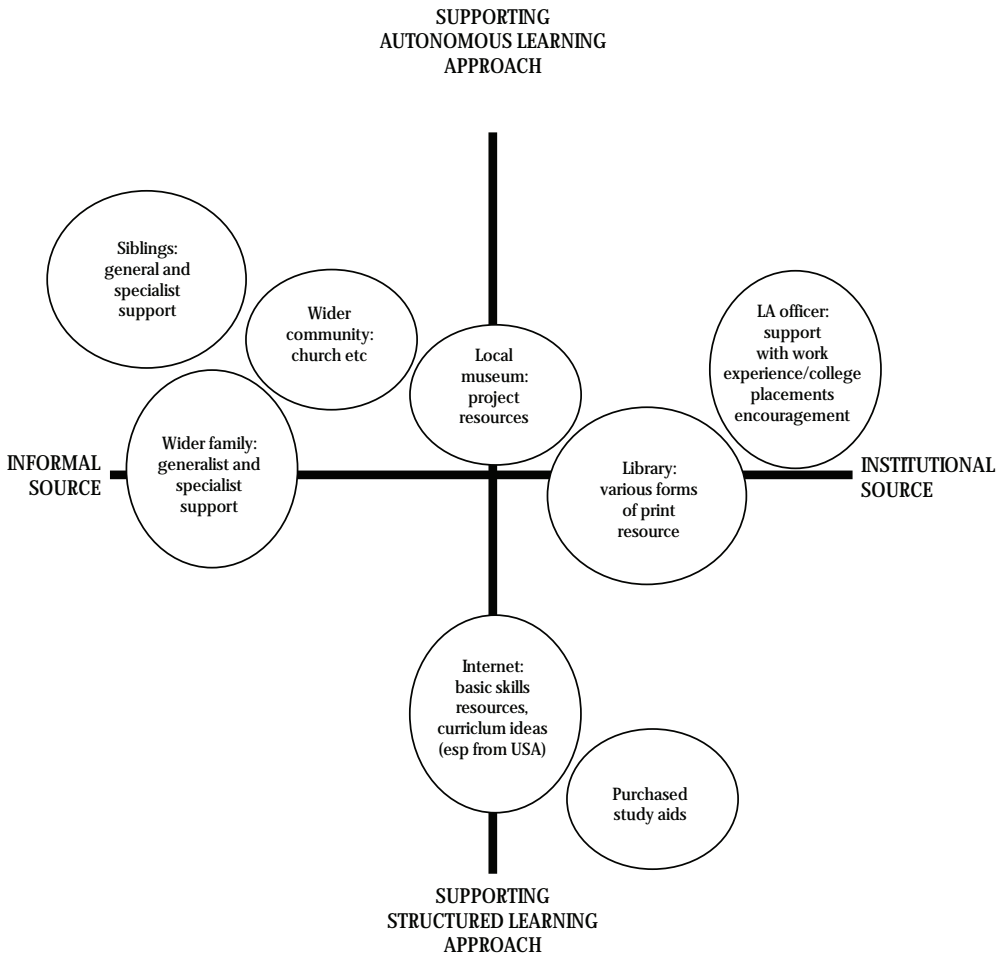
Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the Davis family are illustrated in Figure 3.

The family use curriculum books and materials that are used in schools and the internet is the main source of the exercise work that Mark undertakes. They commonly accessed websites based in the USA because of the availability of better resources, possibly indicating the more advanced and accepted nature of home education. The teachers’ pages of the Texas department of education’s website are used to gain information and advice, particularly for Standard Assessment Test (SAT) examinations and age-relevant assignments. In addition, Mrs Davis is also active in accessing locally available resources and opportunities for Mark, including, for example, the nature of the basic skills provision at the local college. The local library is also used as a resource base.

Furthermore, the knowledge, information and expertise contained within the wider family network have been identified as a highly significant location of resources to support home education. The children have supported each other, through reading and discussing books with each other. Since the family conceptualise and operationalise learning as a ‘24-hour thing’, watching a TV programme can inspire debate and discussion. Extended family members are also involved, for example, a close relative is a zoologist and they have discussions about conservation, and Mark’s grandmother does cooking with him. Mr and Mrs Davis contend that there is always someone in the family who knows something that they want to know more about.

Figure 3 The Davis Family



Withdrawn from school. Three children, two older ones experienced bullying, third chose to take up home education. Core subjects followed plus choice of other study areas.

Beyond the family, community-based links have also proved useful sources of information. Conversations with war veterans on Remembrance Sunday, for example, are felt to have helped history ‘to come alive’ for Mark, as did meeting and talking to a holocaust survivor who Mark met whilst on holiday: ‘Support from the local community is there if you ask and people are very willing to help if they can’ (parents).

In this family’s case, home education organisations, associations and networks do not constitute a regularly accessed source of support. On the whole they have had no other support from other home educating families. They suggest that most of the other families’ approaches are unstructured and that home education groups are more about socialisation of the children rather than learning.

During their home education experiences, the family has made several contacts with local colleges. At the current time, Mark has expressed an interest in attending a land-based/agricultural college in the future, so Mrs Davis has visited the college to collect information. Prior to this, one of the elder children had wished to study travel and tourism. A place at the local college was facilitated, secured and funded through the local authority. This proved to be a successful venture and the young person achieved a ‘student of the year’ award. Local authority personnel have also been key in facilitating work experience placements for the children in this family. In one case, the placement in a school for disabled children led to the young person accessing college to study childcare.

Adequacy of support

The accessing of formal information is an area where Mr and Mrs Davis suggest there are difficulties and further support is required: ‘People don’t tell you. There is a lack of advice forthcoming and unless you actually dig deep, people won’t tell you.’ Having said this, both parents agree that the local authority and agencies/services, such as Connexions, have been helpful when contacted. As a means of improvement, Mr Davis suggested that it could be beneficial if local authorities worked together nationally to produce guidance on where to locate required information.

Similarly, the family believe that improved access to existing sources of information, such as the national grid for learning website, is called for. Although seen as a useful resource, sections of the website are only accessible to schools and they

suggest that it should be open to home educators, or at least to the local authority who could issue home educators with passwords.

Funding was also raised as an issue in terms of additional support for home education. In this case, the family notes that they are fortunate in that they have the financial resources allowing them to purchase the resources necessary to support their children's education. However, it is suggested that other home educators could benefit from some of the funding that a child's school would have received, especially to allow for the renting/leasing of laptop computers.

Case Study 3: The James Family

Background and context

The James family have been home educating their children for three years. The children, aged between 10 and 15, two girls and a boy, attended mainstream school prior to becoming home educated. Initially, the family trialled home educating for a three-month period, and then progressed forward from there as they felt it was working well.

Reasons for home educating

The family decided to home educate because they felt the school process ‘homogenised’ learners, churning children out with GCSEs in numerous subjects, but with a lack of depth of learning in any of these areas. The family were also motivated towards home educating from a desire to spend more time with their children.

Educational approach

The family’s approach to home educating is a balance of reasonably structured learning coupled with the capacity for autonomy, choice and self-direction. The approach is underpinned by a philosophy that human behaviour is directed by both needs and the self, and that behaviour has consequences; the children learn about the consequences of their behaviour through autonomy and self-direction. Mr James is the main home educator, but he is supported by his wife, who works full time within the local authority SEN department. They regard themselves as ‘facilitators’ of learning, rather than teachers. The parents draw on their own experiences of education and business to home educate their children. For instance, the home learning is ‘goal-directed’, modelling some business approaches.

The children enjoy freedom in their learning, with the capacity to be able to explore deeply into topics and subject areas depending on their interests. Emphasis is placed on the children experiencing learning through different activities and sites of learning:

The wonderful thing about home education is that it is not really home education. You are out there in the world, the world is your classroom. We do castles and history and all sorts of things.

Home educator

The educational approach is also personalised to each of the children's needs. One of the three children in the family has learning difficulties so learns less academic skills and more life skills.

Embarking on home education

When the family first explored the idea of home educating they had little knowledge of what to do and where to get support. They were 'stepping out into the dark'. They gradually gathered books and information from the internet and joined one of the national home education organisations to explore possible pedagogy and approaches. The family found the children's school supportive of their decision to home educate and were offered access to the resources at the school and the option of short-term attendances. This potential source of support later diminished due to the authorities' restrictions on non-attending students and the children were subsequently deregistered.

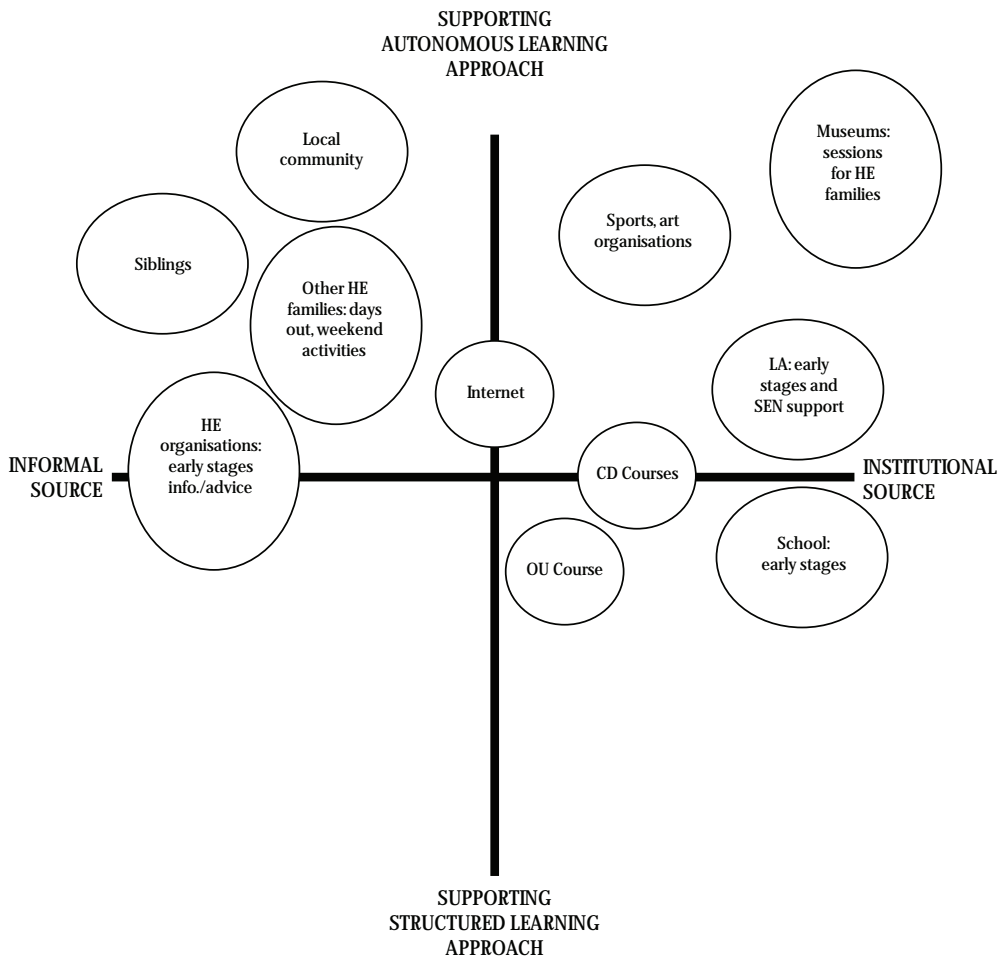
In the early days of embarking on home education the family found the internet invaluable as a source of information and research. However, they found the models of home education promoted in much of the literature and home education organisations did not quite fit their circumstances. Drawing on their own experiences and knowledge of education and business, their approach to home educating began to grow organically. They decided to begin with how to learn, rather than what to learn, and decided they would learn through developing their skills. They used the internet to gather CD courses on typing and improving memory and reading. Gradually, the family realised this type of learning was too formal and they were more interested in exploring different topics in project work.

On reflection, the family feel there is little other support they would have liked in the process of embarking on home education. However, they feel other families forced to home educate and with less confidence, may need support. For themselves it is more important that they researched and explored their own approach independently.

Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the James family are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4 The James Family



Motivated to home educate by a belief that school 'homogenises' learners and a desire to spend time with their children. Structured approach, with the capacity for autonomy.

The family unit is the primary source of support in home educating. The two parents support each other and the older children support the younger learners in the family. Local community facilities, local home education organisations, the internet and the library are the family's other main sources of support. The children are involved with swimming, riding, karate and dance classes, as well as a local youth theatre group that are all open to the general public rather than specific home learner provision. One of the children has a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) so the family receive some advisory support from the local authority in relation to computers/IT, e.g. recommending programmes.

The family socialises with other local home educating families as a member of a local home education organisation, engaging in shared days out and weekend activities. Access to support from other home educating families was restricted by the geographical distances involved, but nevertheless this was felt to meet the family's needs adequately. The family is also a member of one of the national home education organisations, though now established and confident in home educating, they are only a minimal source of support, for instance, providing book and contact lists.

All three children, as well as the parents, are regular users of the National Museum of Wales where they access both sessions and events for home and non-home learners. In addition to the general museum, the museum offers workshops for schools and has recently begun offering monthly workshops for home learners as this group emerged as frequent users of the museum. The one-day themed workshops cover varying topics relating to science and geology, and involve four one-hour sessions, including a tour around the current exhibition, talks from the members of staff and sessions with creative and hands-on activities. The James family were one of 200 home educating families who visit the museum workshops, reflecting the importance of the support role provided by such a facility. The museum workshops provide a social as well as an educational role in supporting both home educators and learners in terms of providing a forum for them to meet and share experiences and ideas.

The eldest child in the family, aged 15, is not studying for GCSEs as these assessments are deemed by the family to be burdensome, superfluous and unnecessary to progressing onto further and higher education. Instead, she is preparing to embark on an OU degree. The family purchased a second-hand copy of the OU foundation course and she is having a practice run and will then apply for the

course. As the family made the decision not to do GCSEs and A-level examinations they feel there is little additional support they need for education in this phase. However, the family clearly value having the alternative and flexibility provided by the OU system.

Adequacy of support

The family feel their support needs were minimal due to their reasons for deciding to home educate. In particular, the decision to home educate was seen as a choice rather than as a last resort to meet the children's needs. In this regard, they feel confident in their own ability to explore information, draw on their own experience, background and ideology and are thus able to resource and support themselves in many regards. Greater levels of support are deemed to be more necessary for those families who embark on home education through necessity, rather than by choice. Indeed, the family do not advocate the need to financially support home educators who make the choice to home educate in preference to other provision.

Despite the family's independent resourcefulness they valued a range of different learning environments to support diverse learning experiences, though these were often not specifically run for home learners. Such facilities include the internet, a national museum, local sports facilities offering swimming, sports and dance lessons. The availability of such facilities clearly played a key role in supporting the family's needs in home educating their children.

There are two areas where the family feel more support is needed; science education and social activities for older children. In terms of the former, the family felt that higher study of science education would need to be supported by access to laboratory facilities. This is currently only a minor issue for the family as the children are more interested in the arts. In terms of the latter, the younger children in the family benefited from meeting up with and sharing activities with other home learners. However, these activities are often aimed at younger children and are therefore less appealing for older children and they are less likely to attend. Thus, there may be a need for more support to enable greater socialisation amongst older (14+) home educated young people.

Case study 4: The Harrison Family

Background and context

There are six young people in the family, (four male and two female), ranging from 15 to 28 years old, and they have all been home educated. The two youngest children aged 15 and 17 are still receiving home schooling. Both the mother and father are educated to university level and feel that their level of knowledge means that they are confident in their abilities to teach their children without needing to access any particular sources of information or resources. Hence, Mrs Harrison supports the children's learning and their father, a doctor, contributes where possible. Overall, the family have been home educating for 25 years. The family live in a city with good transport links and other home educators live in the area.

Reasons for home educating

Mrs Harrison's own experiences of school involved attending a small church school and as a result of these positive experiences, she would have preferred her children to have had similar opportunities. A visit to the local primary school with her son, however, is said to have left Mrs Harrison shocked by the state of the old Victorian building and its impoverished resources. In addition, it is felt that the school's approach to learning was not sufficiently structured enough for her son. As a result, it was decided that she would not send him to school.

Several years later, Mrs Harrison became aware of one of the national home education organisations and attended a meeting with other families where she was informed about the laws relating to home education. She was enlightened by the realisation that parents had the right to educate their children at home, and, as she had no desire to send her children to school, (in the absence of what she deemed to be a 'suitable' school in the local area), she became a home educator. Later, the family's three eldest children did access free-school (a parent-teacher cooperative) on a part-time basis, which was a highly creative time for them.

Educational approach

Initially, the approach to home education was characterised by a degree of autonomy and flexibility, including social and physical activities with other home educating families. However, over the years this approach has taken on a greater

degree of structure, particularly in the case of the youngest children. As a result, for example, there is the expectation that they will sit and learn maths and English. This development is said to have occurred, in part because Mrs Harrison has grown more experienced in home education, and also because of the specific learning requirements of the youngest children. It is suggested that, being boys, writing and discipline could be less natural for them than it was in the case of the older children. As a result, they required a different approach from that of the others.

Embarking on home education

Mrs Harrison felt isolated initially but, as she had three young children, they soon started to blend together. In addition, the actual process of educating the children is felt to have been within the parents' capabilities.

Anyone could teach their children with almost nothing in their hand at age four, it depends what your concept of education is.

Home educator

The approach taken has reflected Mrs Harrison's creativity. She loves to read and has taught the children to read naturally with any reading scheme that came to hand. Similarly, when the children expressed an interest in more scientific areas, their father provided greater levels of input.

Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the Harrison family are illustrated in Figure 5.

Mrs Harrison notes that the main source of help/support in the initial stages of home education came from her husband. They were able to work together and gained confidence in their home education abilities. Other information and advice, at this stage, was generated via reading one of the national home education organisation's magazines, articles and other materials.

Because the family were on a low income they would write off for free materials and resources, get them second hand from jumble sales, charity shops and later on the family also began to borrow resources from other home educators. Support accessed includes information and resources to meet specific educational and learning needs of the children, including dyslexia. Mrs Harrison also attended a

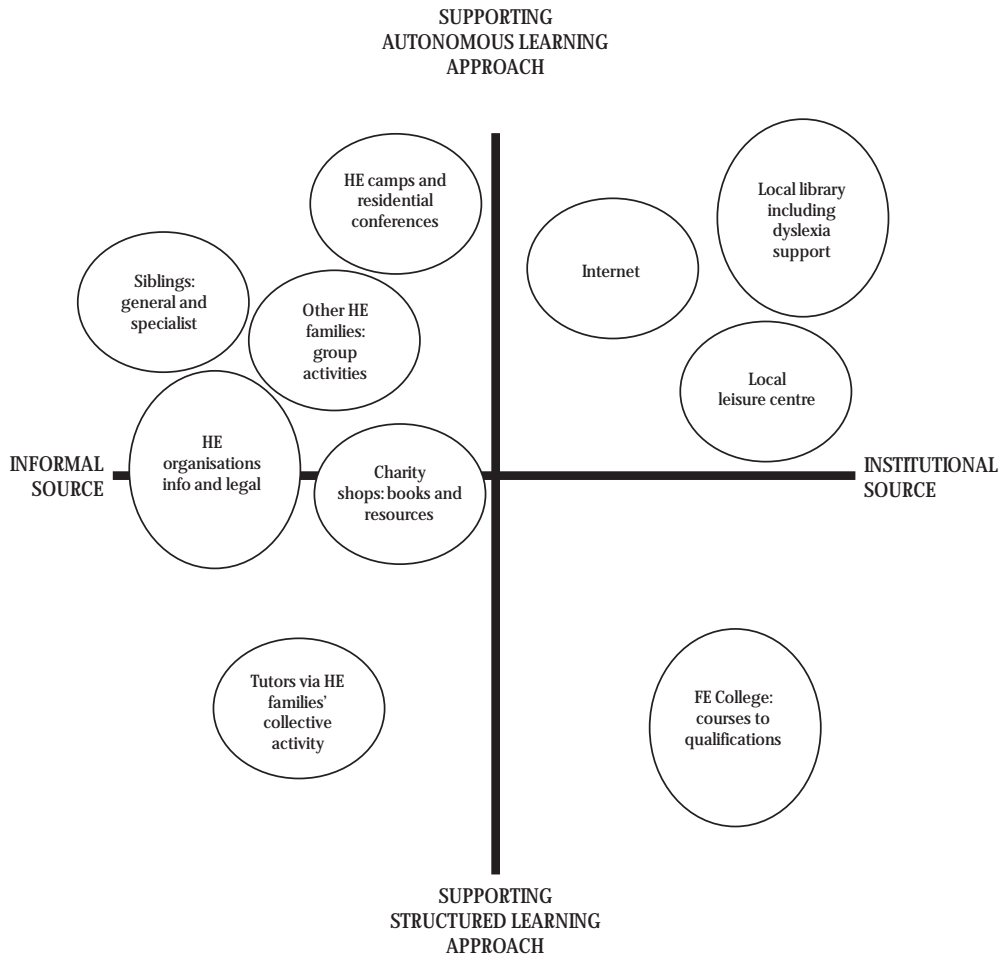
dyslexia support group at the local library where she saw a demonstration of a typing system that could promote and assist the development of improved literacy and communication skills. Support has also been generated within the immediate family, with, for example, one of the older daughters providing piano lessons and the elder son helping the younger one with a computer project.

As time progressed, other home educators have become an important source of support and resources and it is noted that the range of social activities and groups has grown gradually over the years. These are mostly social groups with other home educators that meet in a community hall, meeting hut, adventure playground or nature reserve and usually include crafts, music and free play. Sports facilities in the local area are said to be limited (the situation having worsened by the closure of the local swimming pool). The main facility accessed is the local leisure centre and adventure playgrounds.

The joint commitment of groups of home educating families to fund and support tutor groups has been a vital source of support for older children. For three or four years parents in the locality have organised tutor groups of up to ten children, including professionally tutored groups in maths, English, science, art and music. These took place in premises hired from the local authority but, as they expanded, were held in a variety of locations (e.g. a scout hut, community hall, people's homes). Tutors take the children through a set curriculum; they aim to cover the GCSE syllabus although it is the responsibility of the parents should their children want to take examinations to find an examination centre and do the necessary administration. The crucial element of success hinges on the ability to access good tutors who understand the children and who work in the way that home educators like them to work with the children. This network of support has taken considerable time to develop and evolve, but is now regarded by Mrs Harrison as being highly effective. It is contended that making the effort to find out what resources and networks are available to home educators can be a very valuable and rewarding experience, opening up a whole range of opportunities. In terms of accessing these other groups, one of the children interviewed notes that these were useful and valuable experiences, in terms of practical learning, as well as the opportunities for social interaction with other young people.

National home education organisations and networks have been identified as having provided access to support, information and assistance when necessary. It is suggested that the home education networks can be a highly effective source of

Figure 5 The Harrison Family



Home education was motivated by dissatisfaction with local schools and their approach to learning. An autonomous approach that has become more structured with experience and children's needs.

specialised, (often legally-orientated) advice and knowledge. One home education organisation is seen to have been particularly important. Legal expertise within the network has been disseminated in a variety of ways, e.g. through publications, telephone and email networking, as well as through meetings and gatherings, which have included home education camps and residential conferences.

Although computers are available in the house, one of the children interviewed contends that books were the primary source of information, especially in the early stages. As time progressed, he was able to access internet resources, through local libraries, for example, but it is suggested that the internet, in this case, had not been a major source of information.

The family has not accessed the local authority for support and feels that the local authority does not have anything to offer, largely because of a lack of power, or will to promote and support home education. The family has not accessed any direct financial support. Although seen as potentially beneficial, financial input from external sources is not regarded as being welcome as 'it would probably change the nature of home education and would come with increased regulation, so I am not interested'.

Adequacy of support

In relation to specific learning needs of her children, Mrs Harrison contends that, despite accessing information on dyslexia from a national home education organisation publication, she did not have access to sufficient resources to support her son's learning. Although various support packages are available they are not accessible unless the family purchases them privately at significant cost.

Access to examinations is an area that could be improved. Mrs Harrison notes that she has recently had contact with the local authority regarding assistance in securing access to college places for under 16s, although the senior advisor appears to have had little success so far in engaging colleges in this respect. The local authority did provide details of a headteacher who may allow children to sit examinations at his school. The paperwork process was completed, but the headteacher subsequently refused the request. As a solution to this, the family has, in the past, accessed examinations through attending FE colleges and pursuing the 'one-year top-up GCSEs intended for those who have just left school and need to improve grades':

That is how our children have continued their education and all of them have made use of that and one of them made total use of that and did GCSEs and A levels through FE college. It was not easy and he got a lot of individual tutoring at home and he did get to university which is an incredible achievement really.

Home educator

One of the children interviewed notes that the ability to access college, (and successfully sit GCSE examinations pre-16), had been particularly beneficial. However, changes in the access limitations means that this resource is no longer available to children under 16 years of age, so limiting the opportunities on offer. Mrs Harrison feels that this is an area that needs addressing as the family now has to access and fund private tutors and find examinations centres independently.

In terms of additional help and assistance, Mrs Harrison feels it would be useful if schools received information about, and were encouraged to participate in, flexi-schooling. In addition, she also suggests that some of the local authority's infrastructure and resources could be made available to home educators.

Further support identified as being helpful includes:

- improving the network of tutor groups – finding more tutors and parents who are willing to run the sessions and maintain discipline
- greater availability of low cost/subsidised venues to run tutor groups
- increased access to venues and facilities with low charges, including improved access to local sports facilities
- government funding for young people ages 13 and above to access FE and Adult Education Colleges.

Case study 5: The Donaldson Family

Background and context

There is one child, Lee, aged nine years old, in the family. He has been home educated by his mother for three years. Previously, Lee had attended nursery school and primary school until he came out in year two. The family lives in central London, and Lee's father is not present. Mrs Donaldson does not work and there are no other family members nearby. She notes having had good experiences of school. She has had no teaching experience although has previously volunteered as part of a reading project where she would assist children in school who were falling behind in their reading in schools. Mrs Donaldson worked previously as a secretary and a PA. There are some other home educating families that live close by, and they often meet up, (the local authority puts families new to home education in touch with Mrs Donaldson). There is a PC and a printer in the home and the family has access to the internet.

Reasons for home educating

Lee was falling behind at school because of his medical needs. Mrs Donaldson suggests that he was not provided with work to enable him to catch up. In addition, it is said that Lee experienced bullying and an episode of sexual intimidation which was not dealt with by the school. In addition, Mrs Donaldson also notes general disillusionment with the school system as a whole. Prior to his eventual removal, Lee had attended three primary schools, none of which had been able to support both his medical and educational needs sufficiently.

Educational approach

Following his withdrawal from school, Mrs Donaldson and Lee visited a city farm and met other home educating families. From this meeting, she realised that their autonomous approach to learning would not be suitable for Lee. Hence, Mrs Donaldson believes that Lee requires a degree of structure and needs to do a certain amount of work each day. She believes that maths and English are the basis for everything, but in addition, there is more scope for increased autonomy in the other areas of Lee's learning. The approach to learning is also driven by the feeling that Lee learns more by going somewhere, seeing something and coming back and writ-

ing about it and seeing what else he can find out. As a result, the learning approach is not based on a set curriculum, but topics of interest are followed. Teaching strategies have been developed throughout the home education journey, starting off with acquiring and completing worksheets. Within the learning approach as a whole, Mrs Donaldson is keen to focus on grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Having worked in human resources and having seen applications come in where people just haven't bothered to even fill out an application form properly, it means a lot. First impressions count a lot and I want Lee to have the basis of everything and then everything else will come with it.

Home educator

Hence, in a typical day Lee will study maths and English. In English, for example, he may write a story, complete worksheet books, grammar and spelling tests or he may use the internet to access resources. Lee has a tutor for maths so his mother follows the same themes at home that the tutor is doing in his lessons. In addition, Lee can work on projects in areas in which he has an interest, including, for example, a recently completed history project that focused on exploring the history of his street and tracing a family who lived there in the past. This has entailed use of the internet, visits to the local archives and use of a camera to take photos of the locality. It is hoped that the local authority will help to get Lee's poster of his project displayed in the local museum.

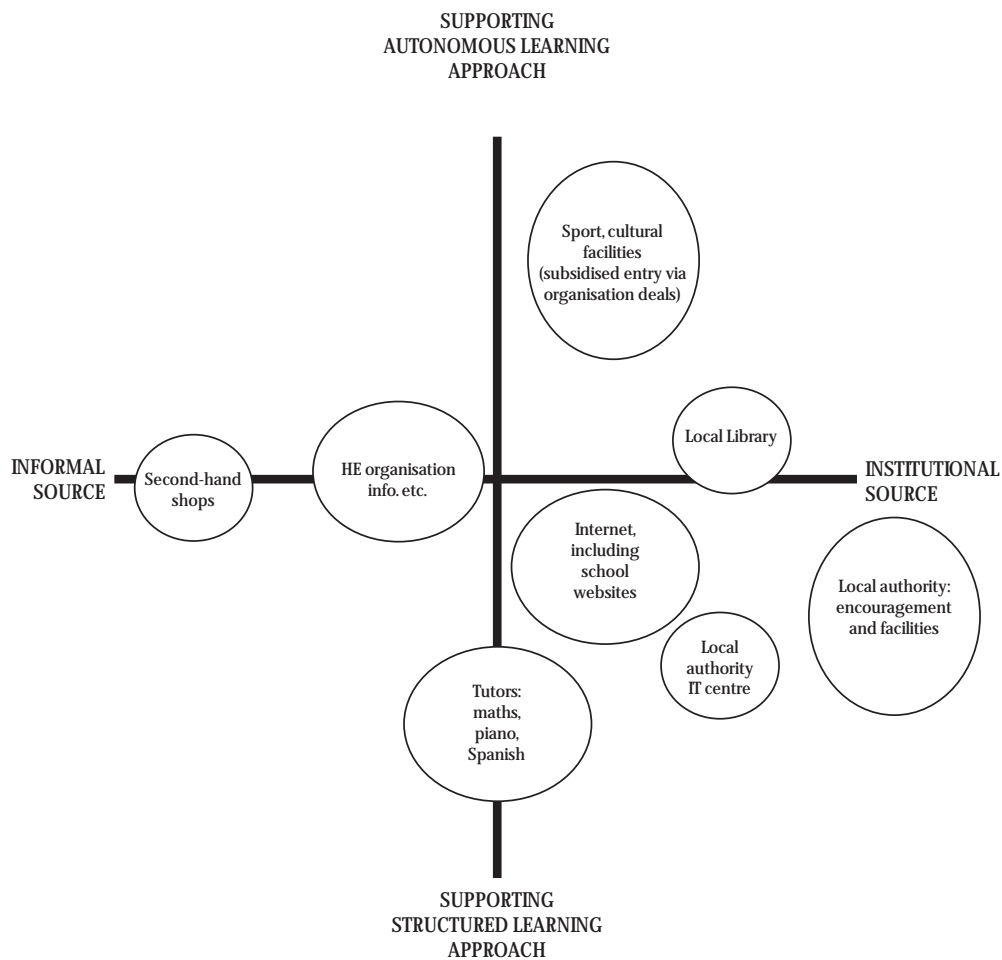
Embarking on home education

Mrs Donaldson notes that she did not plan to remove Lee from school as the decision was prompted by a series of incidents in school. They did not immediately begin home education, as Mrs Donaldson thought it better that Lee should have some time to settle down. During this time, she began to think about what they were going to do and decided to concentrate on English and maths first and let the rest come along gradually. Mrs Donaldson does not suggest that she encountered any difficulties in engaging in home education.

Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the Donaldson family are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6 The Donaldson Family



Home education motivated by a lack of support for the child's needs. Focus on the basics, maths and English, plus experiential learning through projects.

A range of sources of information and ideas was initially accessed, starting with an approach to one of the national home education organisations that led to the contacts being made with other home educating families. From this, awareness of other links and resources developed, including, for example, the availability of suitable tutors in the local area.

Initially, one of the major resources accessed was a small city farm, which presented learning experiences and opportunities via the animals, as well as the wild garden and some craft-related activities on offer. Initially, this involved tutors, but issues between the tutor and particular home education group members led to this being unsustainable. Mrs Donaldson notes that the lack of structure that the home education group became characterised by made it a less useful experience for her and her son.

Other resources accessed include tutors for specific subject areas, including maths, science and music. Hence, Lee attends science and technology lessons run by a tutor who used to be a primary teacher. This group was recommended to the family by one of the national organisations. Lee attends one session for one hour a week and all the children who attend the group follow the same topic, although the teacher works one-to-one with the students and tailors the topics to their level of ability. The lessons are mainly practical and, although homework is not generally given, if Lee wants to find out about something he has covered in the lesson further, he will come home and research information on the internet. The organisation also recommended a maths tutor for Lee. The tutor is a retired senior school teacher who visits the family home once a week and lessons last for an hour. Lee is at senior school level in terms of his maths, although he is only nine years old.

For me maths is not my forte and my personal belief is that maths needs to be taught and it needs to be taught by someone who knows what they are doing. I had got as far as I could and felt that Lee wasn't being challenged and I didn't know where to go so I went for outside help.

Home educator

Lee also accesses private piano lessons and his mother is now looking at accessing Spanish tuition because Mrs Donaldson has gone as far as she can with the subject and wants Lee to do more Spanish conversation. The local authority will be contacted in relation to this.

The internet is seen as a useful means of accessing resources. Mrs Donaldson has discovered that some primary/junior schools have very accessible websites

enabling Lee to do the same worksheets that the children in schools are working on. Lee notes that he likes to use the internet ‘because I get to find stuff out that I can’t normally in libraries, it’s quite good’. Resource materials are also purchased from a local second-hand bookshop where Mrs Donaldson buys workbooks for £1 which would usually cost £5/6 in the shops.

In addition, external facilities are also utilised, including a local IT centre, which is normally used by schools. Mrs Donaldson became aware of the centre through the local newspaper and, through one of the tutors, enquired about the possibility of Lee attending. The local authority has been instrumental in facilitating the family’s access to the centre, largely through organising Mrs Donaldson’s Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance.

Similarly, the local authority was crucial in facilitating access to the local library. The family wanted to access the library when Lee first came out of school although library staff wanted to prevent Lee from attending until 3.30 pm, as was the case for other school children. The local authority representative arranged a meeting between all concerned, resulting in Lee being allowed to attend the library during school time.

In terms of external groups and social activities, Lee goes swimming and attends a weekly Sunday school and the family sometimes meet with other home educating families and go to a museum. Lee has made several pen-pals via a specific web-based resource through one of the national organisations.

On the whole, the family receive no financial support to help with Lee’s home education although Mrs Donaldson notes that, as members of one of the national organisations, they do get subsidised admission into some places of interest. In terms of other support for home education, Mrs Donaldson had contacted one of the organisations for information of the legalities of home education, and the information leaflets she received are said to have been useful.

Adequacy of support

Mrs Donaldson feels the support throughout has been adequate, and states that the family is very self-sufficient; if more support is required, she feels able and willing to ask the local authority for it. The local authority’s offer of flexi-school is something the family might think about when Lee reaches 11 years old (e.g. secondary school age) because he wants to do chemistry.

Case study 6: The Coleman Family

Background and context

There are four children in the family ranging from 11 to 21 years old. All the children have been home educated and the three youngest are still home educated. The family have been home educating for 16 years. They live in a remote location on an island off the coast of Scotland and public transport to the main town (30 miles away) is limited. The family are a single parent family and there are no immediate family living close by. They have had limited contact (mostly via email) with another home educating family living approximately ten miles away. They have computer and internet facilities, including broadband.

Reasons for home educating

Mrs Coleman stated that both she and her husband hated school and ‘we both came to the conclusion we could avoid the children having to go through our experiences’. Although they had made this decision before they had children, they also thought it important that the children had the opportunity to go to school if they wanted to. However, the two eldest never went to school because they were never interested. The third one went to school for two years and then came out again. The youngest went to school at five but he was bullied and, after a year, ended up refusing to go at all.

Educational approach

Mrs Coleman describes her approach as ‘entirely autonomous’. She stated that her eldest daughter’s character had influenced this: ‘If I told her to do something, she did not want to do it, and she has been like that from the moment she was born.’ Mrs Coleman felt that it would have been a constant battle with her if she had not taken an autonomous approach. In addition, she felt that, if her daughter had gone to school, there would have constantly been ‘a battle of wills’ with the teacher.

Embarking on home education

Mrs Coleman stated that she had not found home educating difficult because she perceived this as a continuation of what she had been doing with the children from when they were babies. She focused on building on what they could do rather than what they could not do:

As soon as they were able to hold a paint brush, painting was made available to them and this is something they have continued throughout their lives. As soon as they were able to play the keys on a keyboard they were playing that as well.

Home educator

Each of the children was considered to have their own interests and, although they may start with common activities (e.g. music, painting and reading) they quickly diversified and became very specialised. Mrs Coleman went on to describe the different approaches used with different children, one being described as an avid reader and another as favouring a more formal approach.

Mrs Coleman described herself as the sort of person who reads a lot and researches things. In the early stages, she had got most of her information from one of the national home education organisations and books which she had seen recommended in their newsletter. She also referred to magazines and newsletter from America and the John Holt books as being useful at this stage.

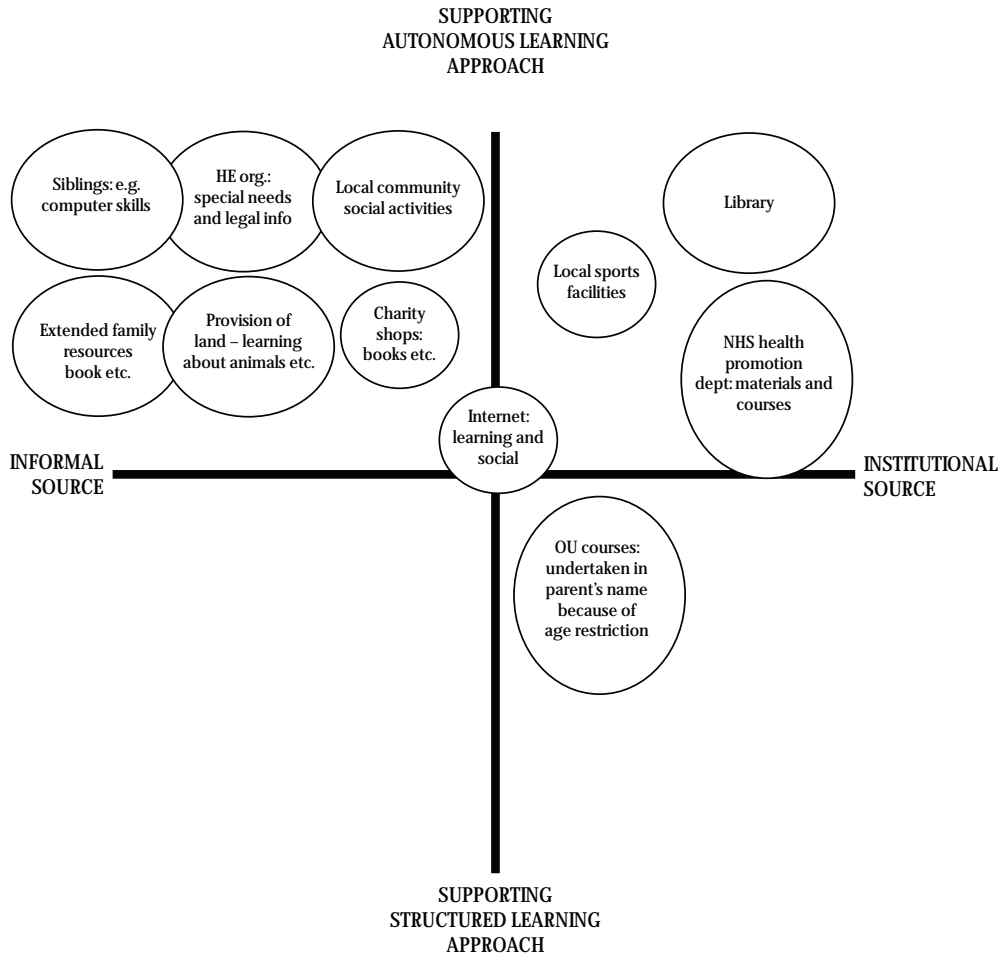
Support accessed

The sources of support accessed by the Coleman family are illustrated in Figure 7.

Mrs Coleman identified one of the national home education organisations as her main form of support. Her third daughter had developed obsessive compulsive disorder very suddenly and the best support she received with this was through the organisation, which put her in touch with someone else who had similar experiences. The family had been involved with their local authority early on. The local school was in danger of closing and she had got in touch with them about sending her first child to school. According to Mrs Coleman, they were told to 'rectify the situation' as soon as possible. She felt they were misinformed about the law relating to home education and, as a result, the family needed support with the legal aspects from the beginning. She described the help she got from the home education organisation in this respect as 'excellent'. She is now on the enquiries line for Scotland as experienced in the law in Scotland and she is going to take a course in law next year.

Mrs Coleman obtained resources from charity shops, as well as the library. In addition, the children's grandparents often sent them books and tapes about the things they were interested in. They also exposed the children to cultural events.

Figure 7 The Coleman Family



Four children, remote Scottish island.
Long-term commitment to home
education principles.

In addition, the family have accessed the health promotion department in the local town, run by the NHS. This was reported to be very useful, as they have games and videos for children, e.g. on drugs, and also run courses, e.g. on heart disease, but they were not very well publicised. According to Mrs Coleman, this is now open to youngsters because the health board is aware of age discrimination. The siblings also help each other as much as they can. The eldest, in particular, helps the others with computer skills. Another particularly important form of support for the family has been having access to land (through friends) to keep animals, since the second eldest is keen on animals.

All the children have undertaken gym and swimming at public facilities in the local town. The two eldest continued with gymnastics until they were seven, but access to these facilities was reported to be difficult as they no longer have a car. With regard to social activities, Mrs Coleman also talked about the children attending Christmas parties, bonfire parties, the local youth club and badminton at the local hall.

Access to the internet was considered to have made a 'huge difference' to the family. It has been particularly helpful for the eldest child because of the support she has had from friends that she has met online. Two of the children had pen friends through one of the organisations. They have friends with a family of four and interact with them and exchange ideas and different skills. There is no local home education group. Mrs Coleman has tried to contact other home educating families on the island but they often want to be left alone.

The older children have not followed GCSE courses. Despite following an autonomous approach, Mrs Coleman has tried to encourage the two eldest ones to think about doing courses so that they have some evidence of what they are capable of. The eldest child did her first OU course when she was 16. She could not do it in her own name and did it in her mother's name. She did another one when she was over 18, in computers. She developed her own website and worked on a music forum as well, as a moderator, an activity that she has continued.

Adequacy of support

Mrs Coleman does not feel that the support available to home educators is adequate. She would have liked more support from the local education authority, who she felt had 'a slightly aggressive' approach and were not sympathetic to home education, as well as being lacking in knowledge of the law. She would

have liked help with finding resources but they were ‘not able to think outside the box’. She thinks it would have been helpful if the local authority had been ‘more open-minded’ about home education: ‘They are still a long way from understanding what would be useful for us.’ However, she also relayed the fact that her third daughter had been ill for a couple of years and the local authority had said she could access a form of flexi-schooling, e.g. attendance at cooking sessions and social sessions with other children, although she had been unable to access this.

Mrs Coleman would like some financial assistance. She tried to get educational maintenance grant, which is available in Scotland (but not in England) to over 16 year olds, but has not received it. She has knowledge of only one home educator who has received this. At the current time this would be particularly valuable for one of her children because she feels it would make ‘a tremendous difference’ to her options. She also thinks it would be helpful if home educated children were able to undertake an OU course in their own right before the age of 18. Open learning packs are available in the library but they do not loan them out to people under 16 so she has always had to get the packs out for them. A greater variety of choice of open learning courses from the library would also have been beneficial so that the children are able to follow courses they are particularly interested in. In addition, if it was possible to take a few courses out at one time this would enable the children to experiment.

Transport was raised as a particular obstacle for the family. If they were able to travel into town and back, this would mean that they would be able to access evening courses.

Overview of the case studies

The case studies provided illustrate a range of different approaches and circumstances. Clearly, some families emerged as relatively self-sufficient, while others called upon multiple sources of support. A fundamental feature of home education is the apparently infinite variety of approaches and circumstances in which home education takes place. That this is in stark contrast to the ‘standardisation’ of mainstream schooling is axiomatic; indeed, home education is often chosen as a deliberate alternative to that standardisation. As a consequence, the range, amount and sources of support for educating young people at home are also very wide (though arguably not wide enough). Different sources may be used in different ways and to support different educational approaches.

8 Conclusion and recommendations

The home educators identified a wide range of sources and types of support which they accessed. The findings indicated that they tended to be proactive ‘resource and information seekers’. They cited ‘human resources’, such as those in the home education community, friends and family, and the local authority as supportive. They also referred to community facilities, such as sports facilities and places of interest, and sources of information, such as the internet and books.

The study revealed the varied support needs of home educators, this being dependent on their approach to education, the age of the children and their individual circumstances. There was a diversity of opinion with regard to support. There was a dichotomy of views between those who adopted a more autonomous approach, who expressed their lack of need for support, and some of those who adopted a more structured approach (particularly those children having left school in negative circumstances), who would welcome additional support. In addition, there was evidence that more support in the initial stages, when parents are embarking on home education, may be helpful.

The national home education organisations are the most significant source of support for home educators, providing a variety of types of support through their websites and newsletters, through local groups and, in particular, by providing a network of home education contacts. There was evidence, however, that they did not always provide the type of support some home educators required, focusing in particular on specific approaches or adopting specific views that were not always shared by others. This was perceived by some as an alternative orthodoxy. Are home educators’ varying needs sufficiently accounted for and could new home educators be directed more quickly to the wealth of support available?

Home educators’ experiences of local authority (and school) contact varied. Some had negative experiences themselves or were aware of the negative experiences of others, making them reluctant to engage with their local authority. There was a view that local authorities could be lacking in knowledge and narrow-minded in their approach to home education. In contrast, there were those whose experiences had been positive, who found the support from the local authority valuable. In addition, the focus groups highlighted the scope for common ground and that there may be a greater willingness on the part of home educators and

local authorities to collaborate than previously thought. There were inconsistencies in the amount and types of support different local authorities were able or willing to provide. How could more consistent support from local authorities be achieved?

There were differing views amongst home educators about their willingness to accept financial support, but also a view that they should be entitled to some financial assistance with their children's education. Could this be made available to those who might welcome it?

Recommendations

The findings highlight that the relationship between home educators and the state is a very sensitive one and, whilst some home educators want nothing from the authorities, others would like more. A previous NFER report (Kendall and Atkinson, 2006) focussed mainly on the viewpoints of local authority officers who have a responsibility for home education. The recommendations presented here reflect and develop the viewpoints of a sample of 20 home educators. Their ideas are offered for readers' consideration and reflection.

- Where home educators are open to some engagement with local government, local authorities and home educators need to work together collaboratively and opportunities need to be provided for meaningful dialogue at all levels (i.e. nationally, regionally and locally). Initial discussions might focus on the key concerns of each party in order to promote mutual understanding and thereby improve relations.
- At a local level, where home educators are willing, some form of regular contact/communication between the local home education community and local authority representatives may be appropriate. This could promote mutual understanding and lead to improved levels of support for home educators from local authorities. The previous obstacle to this has been some home educators' reluctance to identify themselves to the local authority. This may only be overcome by greater clarity concerning the right to home educate.
- The findings indicate a lack of knowledge amongst some local authority officers concerning the rights and responsibilities with regard to home education. Local authorities and home educators need to educate each other. In addition to meetings, joint training opportunities would be beneficial. In particular,

some local authority staff with responsibility for the home education remit may benefit from training from those with knowledge and experience of home education in order to gain a greater insight into the different forms that home education might take and the different circumstances under which home educators operate.

- It may be helpful for the DfES to coordinate local authorities and home education organisations in creating guidelines regarding the rights and responsibilities around home education. It would need to identify good practice in this area. This would help to ensure greater consistency across local authorities.
- Home education organisations were recognised as a major source of support for those embarking on home education. However, the level of help and support given was sometimes dependent on these organisations' philosophies and was not always in touch with the range of needs of parents. In these circumstances home education organisation contacts could consider redirecting newcomers to more appropriate sources of support. In addition, home education organisations and local authorities could be more proactive in identifying those who require help, but find it difficult to access.
- Where new home educators would welcome a local authority visit, it should be considered good practice for the local authority to provide an information pack for home educators, giving national home education organisation and local group contacts. They might also consider instigating a befriending system for new home educators, where they are initially supported by established home educating families if they think they would find this helpful.
- Examples of good practice in the area of home education amongst local authorities already exist which are recognised amongst the home education community. There is therefore much that could be learnt by providing local authorities with opportunities for sharing experiences in this area.
- Support from local authorities (and other sources) is more likely to be considered by home educators if it is offered (not forced) and informed by the varied needs and circumstances of home educators, as revealed by this study.
- Where possible, local authorities should consider opening up greater learning opportunities for home educated children (through greater access to local authority and school facilities) since this would be beneficial for those children who wish to take this up. The Every Child Matters agenda and the move towards schools as 'learning communities' could support this process.

- The findings suggest that some home educators would be reluctant to accept financial assistance towards their children's education. However, it might be pertinent for the Government to consider home educators' entitlement to a basic level of financial assistance with their children's education (or the equivalent in resources). A system could be established whereby home educators who choose to are able to draw down funding to pay for resources (e.g. books, college placements, examinations etc.) through the local authority. The Government may also wish to consider the approach adopted by other countries in providing some financial assistance to home educators on a regular basis.
- The level of understanding about home education amongst the general public needs to be raised, particularly with regard to its legal status and the variety of educational approaches that can be adopted.

Appendix 1 Sample information: the 20 families interviewed

Table A1.1 The number of children in families

Number of children	Number of families
1	10
2	4
3 or more	6
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.2 The gender of the children

Gender of the children	Number of families
Male	11
Female	7
Both	2
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.3 The education sector

Education sector	Number of families
Primary only (e.g. 4–11 yrs)	9
Secondary only (e.g. 11–16 yrs)	9
Both	2
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.4 The length of time home educating

Length of time	Number of families
2 years or under	4
3–5 years	9
6–10 years	4
Over 10 years	3
TOTAL	0

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.5 The geographical location of families

Area	Number of families
London	5
South east	3
West midlands	2
North west	3
Yorkshire	2
Wales	2
Scotland	3
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.6 The home educators' education history

Qualifications/education	Number of families
Teacher	3
Degree level	7
A level/college	3
Secretary/PA	1
Negative experiences	2
No information provided	4
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Table A1.7 The main reasons for home educating

Main reason	Number of families
A commitment to a non-school approach e.g. independent learning	8
SEN e.g. autism	4
Child's negative school experiences e.g. bullying	4
Parents' negative school experiences	2
Religious reasons e.g. Christianity	1
School environment e.g. buildings, safety	1
TOTAL	20

Source: Interviews with parents, NFER study, 2007

Appendix 2 Sample information: the online survey

Table A2.1 The role of respondents

Role	Frequency	Per cent
Home educator	77	75
Home educated student	3	3
Home education organiser	11	11
Interested party	4	4
Other	8	8
TOTAL	103	101

Source: Online survey conducted by NFER, 2007

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Table A2.2 The length of time respondents had been involved in home education

Length of time	Frequency	Per cent
Up to 5 years	54	52
5–10 years	15	15
11–15 years	12	12
Over 16 years	2	2
Non-responses	20	19
TOTAL	103	100

Source: Online survey conducted by NFER, 2007

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Table A2.3 Respondents' number of children in home education (present and past)

Number of children	Frequency	Per cent
1	17	17
2	39	38
3	14	14
4	10	10
5	1	1
13	1	1
Non-responses	21	20
TOTAL	103	100

Source: Online survey conducted by NFER, 2007
Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

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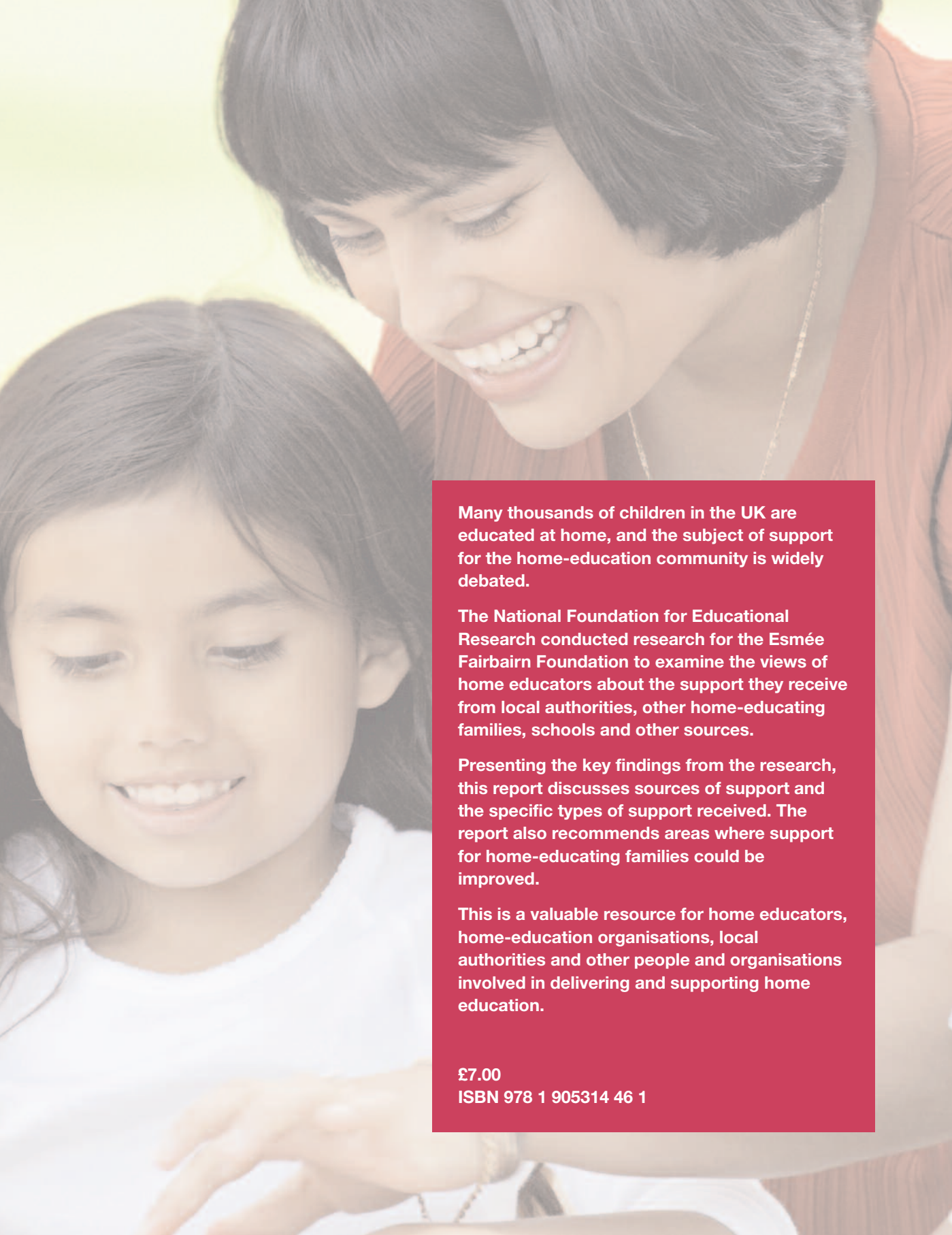
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Many thousands of children in the UK are educated at home, and the subject of support for the home-education community is widely debated.

The National Foundation for Educational Research conducted research for the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to examine the views of home educators about the support they receive from local authorities, other home-educating families, schools and other sources.

Presenting the key findings from the research, this report discusses sources of support and the specific types of support received. The report also recommends areas where support for home-educating families could be improved.

This is a valuable resource for home educators, home-education organisations, local authorities and other people and organisations involved in delivering and supporting home education.

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