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Exploring the reasons behind a significant rise in families choosing to home educate in Hambleton and Richmondshire

# RESEARCH REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Research Brief

This exploratory research study commissioned by the Locality Board set out to identify and investigate the reasons for a significant rise in families choosing Elective Home Education in Hambleton and Richmondshire. Through in-depth interviews with school leaders and families, the research aimed to explore the specific issues influencing families who choose to home educate, the barriers preventing them returning to school and recommendations as to how to reintegrate young people back into fulltime schooling.

## Research Methods

The research was small-scale and exploratory in nature, relying heavily upon qualitative data gained from in-depth interviews. The subject of the study, particularly for families and young people, was often personal and highly sensitive, and focus was given to understanding the narratives and lived experiences of families and their education choices. For ethical reasons, all participants have remained anonymous and conclusions have been drawn generically so individuals and schools cannot be identified. Direct quotes have been used as much as possible to ensure the voice of the research is authentic. Where appropriate, comparisons have been drawn with national research and wider debates about EHE nationally, including flexi-schooling.

## Key findings

This is a complex and emotive field of research that has revealed a significant number of interconnected and often highly individualised factors, requiring deep understanding about educational philosophy, policy and practice, mental health, special educational needs, parenting and inclusion. Whilst the impact of Covid was mentioned at length in discussions with school leaders and was reflected in both national and regional data trends, an interesting finding is that families interviewed in Hambleton and Richmondshire rarely gave Covid-19 as a reason for choosing EHE. In the broadest terms, this research suggest Covid has been the 'unveiling' of a range of multi-faceted issues that were already present.

One of the key findings early on in the study was that the term Elective Home Education is misleading. Only a small number of families interviewed claimed to have made a truly 'elective' choice to home educate. Most families had been on a challenging journey through mental health services, SEND support, school avoidance and often legal attendance proceedings, to finally arrive at home education as a last resort. Another key finding was that home educators fall into distinct groups, and that understanding these groups is helpful for exploring barriers and actions.

Perspectives and responses from schools and families have been reported on separately in the main report, however there were key themes for the reasons for the rise in EHE shared by all participants:

- Young person mental health issues, most notably anxiety.
- Challenges accessing external support or provision for young people with social, emotional, mental health issues, often exacerbated by the rural geography of the area.
- Complex SEND profiles, particularly those who don't meet the criteria for EHCP or who find mainstream school challenging.
- Attendance issues, including attendance target pressures in schools and emotionally based school avoidance.
- Dissatisfaction with mainstream educational approach or curriculum.

The most significant barriers identified to returning to school were:

- Identifying, locating and communicating with the home education community.
- Mistrust and communication break-down with the school.
- Fear of further trauma for the young person.
- Lack of support and empathy for parental/family experience of choosing EHE
- Lack of flexibility within school systems, policies and procedures to accommodate need.
- Philosophical differences about curriculum or educational approach.

## Recommendations

The recommendations have grown organically out of the complex and often emotional ground between school and home educating families, and the narratives that have developed between them. The central themes of the recommendations are flexibility, communication and trusted relationships. All stakeholders are encouraged to examine where the findings intersect with their roles and responsibilities, and what action can be taken to help.

- Recognition of the issues raised about EHE at strategic level, through clear policy, whole school mental health initiatives and honest debate about EHE.
- Support for schools to adopt flexible policies or working practices, that recognise the complexities of individual EHE cases.
- Embed high quality training and consistent approaches for all stake-holders in schools to identify risk-factors associated with emotional issues and school attendance.
- Positively engage with and value the experiences of the home education community by developing trusted relationships, tangible support and holistic oversight.
- Develop provision of educational settings for vulnerable young people without EHCP to attend, who find mainstream school challenging and need an alternative, personalised approach.

- Establish a network of experts who can advocate for young people and their families and ensure consistency of communication, support and provision, rooted in understanding and trust.
- All stakeholders to prepare in advance for proposed compulsory register for all school aged children. Whilst EHE rates in Hambleton and Richmondshire are beginning to stabilise after the 95% increase reported in the academic year 2020/21, it is likely they will rise significantly again once all children and young people are accounted for.

## Limitations

The complex and transient nature of the home education community, coupled with an absence of definitive data at the outset of the project, made contacting and engaging families in research challenging. Whilst the number of participants is comparative, and slightly higher than similar research studies in other areas, the interviews still only represent a small number of families currently home educating in Hambleton and Richmondshire. The voice from Primary Schools is also significantly smaller than that of Secondary Schools, largely because of their greater number and less experience of EHE.

## Opportunities

This was a small exploratory study, but its remit and core themes expanded through each interview. There is ample opportunity to take this research further, and any one of the reasons, barriers or recommendations could warrant further study with the view to taking positive action to address the growing numbers of EHE. A core theme of this project is the need for a mindset shift about EHE, and an opening up about how we talk, think, relate and value the narratives of families and young people who choose home education.

## Introduction

Home education, often referred to as 'elective home education' or 'home-schooling', has increased nationally in recent years and has been accelerated by the pandemic. Although the exact figure is unknown, the most recent estimate suggests 81,200 children are registered for home education in England. As registration is still voluntary, this is very likely an underestimate. The increasing rates of home education nationally, have been reflected in North Yorkshire and are significantly higher in the locality of Hambleton and Richmondshire.

In England, education is compulsory but school is not. Responsibility for children's education lies with parents and they have a legal right to choose to educate their child at home. The reasons for families choosing to home educate are broad, varied, and often highly complex. Whilst for some families it is an active choice fuelled by ideological or philosophical views, for the majority it is a combination of many factors, including mental health issues, SEND, attendance issues and more recently Covid-related concerns. These issues are often interwoven and may change over time.

## Research Brief

As a consequence of the rise in pupils choosing to home educate, the Locality Board commissioned the services of a Specialist Leader of Education (SLE) to carry out a research project into the specific factors that are influencing families within Hambleton & Richmond who choose to pursue home education. As part of this project, the SLE was asked to undertake a series of interviews with school leaders, students and families to gain an in-depth understanding of:

- the reasons for choosing home education
- the barriers preventing pupils returning to school
- recommendations to support pupils who have chosen to home educate successfully reintegrate back into school.

The SLE was also asked to develop a case study of a school that has made a success of Flexi-Schooling.

## Research Methods

The research was small-scale and exploratory, and relied heavily upon gaining rich, qualitative data from in-depth interviews with both school leaders and families, to

develop a fully rounded picture of the lived experience of those who have chosen home education.

The research was conducted in four stages.

- A review of the national picture of home education, literature reviews, current government reports, national data, national research and reports from key bodies such as Association of Directors of Child's Services (ADCS), Education Otherwise, Ofsted and IPPO. This evidence is briefly summarised at the beginning of the report, but is woven throughout as themes arise.
- In-depth interviews with primary and secondary headteachers and senior leaders, including alternative provision. The study reflects the voice of 16 senior leaders from Hambleton and Richmond Schools.
- Locating, contacting and conducting in-depth interviews with families, and where possible young people, about their experiences. (Because of the nature and unpredictable timescale of contacting and interviewing with families, this stage merged into others). The study reflects the voice of 19 families currently home educating in Hambleton and Richmondshire.
- Further research and discussions with several educational professionals about the broader issues raised in the previous stages such as flexi-schooling, attendance, inclusion, emotionally based school avoidance and anxiety (EBSAA), technology assisted learning and curriculum. These final discussions helped clarify and inform the recommendations.

### **Contacting families**

Small-scale studies on EHE conducted in other areas of England, and even some of the larger University-funded studies, all faced similar challenges when trying to contact the home education community. Because it is not yet a legal requirement to register a child as EHE, finding contact details for families to approach for interview was a significant challenge. Whilst a strength of this study is the number of participants compared to uptake in similar studies in other regions, the percentage is still a small representative of the home education community.

At the time of embarking on research, there were 164 children registered for EHE in Hambleton and Richmondshire, however only a small number of these had agreed to receive communications from the LA or for their contact details to be shared externally. The LA were able to provide 15 contact details for EHE families, and out of these, only four families agreed to be interviewed for the research. Schools were generally unable to put the researcher in touch with families who had chosen to EHE and reported that this was largely due to relationships having broken down. Families who had actively and positively chosen to home educate were equally hard to contact and engage with. Most of these families were deeply committed to home education and fully and positively engaged with their home education communities. These families communicate via closed Facebook groups, and for ethical considerations the researcher did not try to engage with them.

Making contact with families and broadening the number of participants took up by far the largest bulk of time during the study, and because the nature of the study was sensitive and often very personal, the research depended upon engaging positive

relationships with families so they would offer their views and experiences voluntarily, and then encourage others to do so. Some contacts were made via parenting groups, others via a public Facebook call on a general local site, and the others largely through word of mouth. Where possible, interviews were conducted in person, particularly with families and young people. The others were conducted via Teams or by phone call.

### **Ethical considerations**

Because the narratives families and young people were sharing were highly personal, and at times upsetting, their shared experiences have been kept anonymous. The conclusions have therefore been drawn more widely and generically so individual cases cannot be identified, with direct quotes from participants used as much as possible so the voice and message of the research is authentic. After negotiation with the LA, wording was agreed about how the project should be presented in any written communication and its purpose and audience made clear.

Whilst school leaders were speaking from a professional viewpoint, their perspectives were sometimes equally compelling and personal. Again, themes and conclusions have been reported on more generically so as not to name individual schools or staff members. Occasionally, the research matched up cases spoken about by both the school and the family, and revealed a contradiction between the school's policies, procedures and actions, and the actual experience of the young person and their family. These cases were multi-faceted, complex and the reasons for home education highly individualised. Again, careful judgements have been made when reporting on these so as not to implicate individuals or schools.

### **Terminology**

It became clear early in the research that the term 'elective' home education can be misleading or provocative, as many of the families described themselves as not having made an elective choice, but had been compelled to follow the path of home education due to a combination of complex reasons. Care was taken during interviews about how to refer to home education without making assumptions. The terms EHE, home-education and home-schooling are used interchangeably throughout this report to acknowledge both official terminology and also sensitivity to the participants of the study. It's also important to distinguish between the 'remote learning' the majority of children were experiencing during Covid lockdowns, and how this is distinctly different from home education. National media, social media and many families themselves across the country spoke about their experiences of 'home-schooling' during the pandemic. For many participants in this study, their children were learning from home before the pandemic and have continued to afterwards.



# Research outcomes

## National and regional data

The Association of Directors of Child's Services (ADCS) have been conducting EHE surveys in Local Authorities since 2016. Prior to the pandemic, their surveys suggested the national EHE population was growing by approximately 20% each year. This was reflected in local data, with an 18% increase in Hambleton and Richmondshire recorded in the academic year 2019-2020.

The most recent ADCS survey for the academic year 2020-2021 sought to capture the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on EHE rates, and estimated that the total cumulative number of children and young people being home educated during this period to be 115,542, representing a 34% increase.

According to data from 126 Local Authorities it is estimated that almost half (49.8%) of this cohort became EHE during the 2020/21 academic year, with peak months during Sept 202 and March 2021, suggesting that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the number of children and young people currently electively home educated in England. LAs also reported fluctuating numbers as children returned to school after closures, but the consistent message is they cannot be certain of the true size of the EHE cohort as there is currently no statutory register.

The regional data for North Yorkshire and Hambleton and Richmondshire, broadly follows national trends, however the percentages are considerably higher. Data for the academic year 2020 – 2021 reported a 72% increase in North Yorkshire, with EHE numbers rising from 237 to 408 registered children, and in Hambleton and Richmondshire a reported 95% increase from 41 to 81 registered children.

### **Academic year 2020-2021**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Percentage increase compared to previous year</b>
National	34%
North Yorkshire	72%
Hambleton and Richmondshire	95%

Numbers of EHE peaked in May 2022, with 940 recorded in North Yorkshire and 168 in Hambleton and Richmondshire. Data for the current academic year suggests the beginning of a downward trend in families choosing EHE, whilst numbers in September 2022 show a 26% decrease compared to the previous year.

## Reasons for choosing home education

### From the perspective of schools in Hambleton and Richmondshire

Almost all schools who took part in interviews had experienced a significant rise in EHE, particularly since the pandemic and noted it as a point of concern. Very few primary schools volunteered to take part in the research; a likely reason for this is there is a large number of primary schools in this area, (some with very small numbers on roll), and whilst EHE is increasing, individual primary schools may only have seen just one pupil leave and therefore leaders have not recognised it as a problem in their setting. Whilst the secondary school leaders interviewed in this research had seen much larger numbers leave than primary, unconfirmed data from the Local Authority suggests a full span of age groups, with numbers peaking in SATS year groups in primary and GCSE year groups at secondary.

The reasons given for the rise in EHE by schools were broad and varied, but unlike the families interviewed, almost all schools referred to Covid having had a significant impact, and it ran as a theme throughout most discussions. Occasionally reasons were given specific to their social demographic, however there were significant and common themes:

#### **Anxiety and Mental Health**

Anxiety and other mental health issues were the most commonly stated reasons by schools. In some cases anxiety was specifically Covid-related fear of illness and infection, either from the pupil or the parent. In other cases the anxiety was more indirectly related to the pandemic and took the form of social anxiety due to long periods out of a school environment.

*“Anxiety levels among young people are just so high. Some children just couldn’t cope with being back after school closures, they were overwhelmed by being back among others and developed significant social anxiety.”* Senior Leader

*“We’ve seen quite a lot of separation anxiety between parents and pupils, particularly since the pandemic.”* Senior Leader

*“We’ve seen a large increase in a full range of mental health issues; anxiety in particular, but also ticks and Tourette’s, and more unusual and complex presentations of anxiety since the pandemic.”* Headteacher

In most cases however, schools stated that Covid had only exacerbated and complicated anxiety or mental health issues that were already present:

*“Anxiety can be bubbling along under the surface without school noticing for some time, and then something comes along and tips it over the edge. For many of our pupils, Covid was the trigger that exposed their difficulties or brought them to a head.”* Deputy Headteacher

Children struggling to attend school for mental health reasons was discussed at length, particularly in secondary schools. Families who ended up electively home educating had often experienced a long and drawn-out narrative of school avoidance before the pandemic.

*“Many parents just can’t face the fight of trying to get their child into school anymore so they choose to EHE.” Assistant Headteacher*

*“Some children just can’t cope with a full school day. Their anxiety is so heightened, but often masked.” Senior Leader*

*“We need to have honest debate about the children who simply just can’t cope with mainstream school.” Senior Leader*

*“Frequently anxiety issues are confused and exacerbated by other SEND issues, particularly ASD. This can make the reasons for choosing EHE even more complex.” Senior Leader*

In some cases there was notable frustration from senior leaders about the role of schools in dealing with mental health issues.

*“Mental health issues are the most frequently quoted reasons for losing children to home education. CAMHS just say mental health is the priority over school attendance. It’s just easier to take these children off role. No-one is chasing them or holding them to account.” Pastoral Lead*

*“Schools can be afraid to challenge when mental health is stated as a reason for non-attendance.” Senior Leader*

*“Sometimes the parents experience high levels of anxiety too, and this can impact on the child. You’ve got to ask sometimes whether EHE suits the parent or the child.” Pastoral Lead*

The experiences of school leaders in Hambleton and Richmondshire are echoed nationally in the recent government Covid 19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Surveillance Report, which states children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing has been substantially impacted during the pandemic. Data from February and March 2021 shows that rates of probable mental disorder in children and young people have increased significantly between 2017 and 2021. In 6 to 16 year olds, rates had increased from 11.6% to 17.4%, and among 17 to 19 year olds, rates had increased from 10.1% to 17.4%. (*Covid 19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Surveillance Report April 2022*)

Digital NHS statistics have also reported a record number of more than 400,000 children a month being treated for mental health problems, which shows an unprecedented wellbeing crisis in children and young adults. (*Digital NHS Statistics from Healthcare Conference UK*)

Voices from Mental Health Charities nationwide are also speaking out about mental health and young people, and suggesting frontline services in UK schools reporting rising numbers in young people struggling with anxiety, self-harm, eating difficulties and suicidal thoughts. A survey published in February 2022 by Place2Be and the National Association of Head Teachers found that mental health problems among pupils had increased since the start of the academic year, including low self esteem (86%), depression (76%) and constant feelings of anger (68%).

### **Lack of support from external agencies**

All schools expressed deep frustration about the lack of support from external agencies, with key agencies being either over-subscribed or with waiting lists of up to

a year. This was spoken about at length with reference to children with SEND, but considerably more so in relation to mental health services. Interviews revealed significant frustration about the length of time to make referrals, and during that time vulnerable young people completely disengaging with school, resulting ultimately in unplanned and unprepared for EHE.

*“External agencies are saturated, CAMHS have effectively shut their doors. After that there are so few alternatives. Families feel there is no-where left to turn and then choose EHE.”*  
Pastoral Lead

*“Everything just takes so long. It can take months, if not a year to get support, that’s a significant percentage of a child’s life, by then they have disengaged and stopped attending school.”* Senior Leader

*“There is such poor access to external services in this area. It’s such a vast county, you have to travel long distances to get the right kind of mental health support.”* Headteacher

Whilst extreme behaviour issues were discussed, many schools highlighted the challenge of finding support for young people who are very shy and timid in school. In some cases these were the children that ended up in EHE as their anxiety about attending became so great.

*“There just doesn’t seem to be any support to help schools or parents with children who can’t cope with attending mainstream school – either because of behaviour, SEND or increasingly children suffering from anxiety.”* Assistant Headteacher

*“There is such a lack of support for children who struggle with mainstream school.”* Senior Leader

*“Now children can access medical tuition for mental health reasons without a consultant’s letter which is much better than it was, but the support is very short term.”* Pastoral Lead

Schools highlighted frustrations on all sides about access to mental health support and questioned what the school’s role has become.

*“Many parents are desperate to find the right pathway to support, but can’t find it. Others experience significant parenting difficulties, they don’t know how to help their children and responsibility is left to schools.”*

*“Because of the lack of external support, there is an increasing expectation and pressure on schools to tackle mental health issues.”*

*“We have to ask some serious questions – are the children who can’t access support from SEND hubs, have no EHCP support, access no funding from LA, or don’t have TA support in school etc the ones who are ending up in EHE?”* Primary Headteacher

Again, the lack of access to external services is reflected in research nationally. A report conducted by the charity Place2Be, as a response to the surge of mental health cases, 4,700 schools and colleges are now expanding their mental health teams and opening a 24/7 mental health crisis telephone support service for all ages.

## **Attendance issues**

Schools in general, but particularly secondary schools, described feeling under great pressure about attendance targets and this often drove decision-making about when

to follow formal attendance proceedings, rather than explore more bespoke or flexible routes for the young person.

*“Attendance is significantly down since Covid and we are under constant pressure to improve it.”*  
Deputy Headteacher

*“Many children get into a cycle of non-attendance which is very challenging to break.”* Pastoral Lead

Some schools acknowledged that families had withdrawn their child from school to electively home educate, specifically to avoid legal attendance proceedings.

*“The bulk of our pupils who have left to pursue EHE did so because they are at risk of further exclusions or prosecution for non-attendance.”* Pastoral Manager

*“When you push hard on attendance, some parents just say, right, home education, and there’s nothing legal to prevent this and no support in place. It’s just too easy”* Senior Leader

There was a lot of misunderstanding about what flexi-schooling means, how it differs from part-time timetabling (often used for short-term reintegration of pupils) and a lack of clarity about how register codes worked around this.

*“We are so accountable for attendance figures. We couldn’t ever adopt flexi-schooling.”* Deputy headteacher

*“We have never had any children flexi-schooling – I don’t really know what it is or how we would go about it.”* (Senior leader)

Nationally, school attendance has been brought into sharper focus since the pandemic and this has led to the Department for Education issuing new guidelines on attendance, including statutory guidance on exclusions and suspensions.

## **Geographical and transport issues**

Hambleton and Richmondshire spans a large geographical area, stretching almost between the Cumbrian border to the west and the Teesside boarder to the east. The distances between schools, transport links and the difficulties surrounding managed moves between schools were mentioned by senior leaders as being impactful and significant reasons for increasing EHE.

*“If a child struggles in one school, it is very challenging to make a managed move to another as the distances are so large; transport is extremely difficult to arrange and very costly.”* Headteacher

*“There are big distances between secondary schools so it’s often a case of ‘it’s here or nowhere’ and if the school isn’t right for the child there really is no other choice.”* Assistant headteacher

The lack of choice of provision, including school size or specialist provision was also discussed.

*“Hambleton and Richmondshire is a vast area, and yet there are just so few services, especially for those with mild learning difficulties (MLD) or Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs.”*  
Headteacher

*“Not every child wants to go into a really large secondary school. It shouldn’t be a ‘one-size-fits-all.’”*  
Assistant headteacher

## **Devaluing Education**

Secondary schools in particular reported that school closures during the pandemic had a hugely negative effect on pupils and families’ perception of school. School leaders expressed deep concern about a general sense of ‘devaluing education’, shown in poor attendance figures and also a general feeling of despondency and disengagement.

*“Covid had, and is still continuing to have, a massive impact on both children and parent’s perception of school. There is a sense that school isn’t important, they don’t value it like they did.”* Assistant headteacher

*“Children just stand up and walk out of lessons. They don’t value learning anymore.”* Assistant headteacher

Various pieces of research have been conducted nationally about re-engaging learners post-pandemic, with most reports such as the Outward Bound Trust Report suggesting vulnerable children, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs being the most negatively affected. (*Helping Young People Reconnect, Reengage and Rebuild during the Covid-19 Pandemic*)

## **Experience of remote learning**

Most schools felt their response to providing remote learning during pandemic school closures was rapid and effective. Children generally engaged in online provision; new technologies and learning platforms were adaptable, flexible and far-reaching and in many cases pupils made good progress. Schools reported that many pupils and families had enjoyed the flexibility of remote learning, that a change in parent working patterns had facilitated a change in approach to learning, and there was a realisation that education could be done differently.

*“We almost did our job too well during Covid. Our online provision was really strong and children enjoyed learning in a lovely little bubble at home. Coming back to school was a challenge for some after this.”* Assistant headteacher

*“Some children had such a good experience of remote learning and opted to pursue EHE as a result. Some of these families were surprised they couldn’t just carry on with the curriculum we were providing and had to find their own.”* (Senior Leader)

*“Some of our pupils, particularly those with SEND really benefitted from our remote learning provision. The pace and flexibility of the day really suited their learning style and needs.”* (Deputy Headteacher)

*“Since Covid there seem to be so many adverts out there of companies providing Home Education resources – it’s made it a possible route for parents when it wasn’t before.”* (Senior Leader)

## From the perspective of young people and families

Many discussions began with reasons for elective home education broadly in line with the school, but through deeper discussion revealed dissatisfaction with the way they had been treated by school and the education system in general. Conversations with families were often highly emotive. Many parents and young people described significant anguish about their reasons for pursuing home educate.

### **Anxiety and Mental Health Issues**

Almost all families and young people stated anxiety and mental health issues as one of the main reasons for choosing to home educate. In one case the issue was specifically related to Covid related health anxiety, but in most cases, anxiety was prevalent before the pandemic and Covid only exacerbated or brought issues to a head.

*“My child experienced extreme anxiety and hallucinations, which led to depression, problems with sleeping, self-harming and difficulty attending school. Their mental health was just more important than getting them to school.” (Mother of 14 year old)*

*“My child suffered from repeated panic attacks about going to school. They experienced significant social anxiety and stress.” (Mother of 16 year old)*

*“We have had to take an approach of ‘unschooling’ because my child’s mental health was just so bad. Even after 6 months, my child still struggles to get out of bed.” (Mother of 16 year old)*

*“My child experienced such extreme anxiety and depression. When we chose to home ed, it’s like a weight was lifted.” (Mother of 17 year old)*

Young people themselves expressed their feelings of anxiety and fear at school.

*“I didn’t fit in with the popular kids and didn’t feel safe to learn in that environment. I feel safe at home and learn well here.” (16 year old)*

*“I just kind of fell off the edge of school and couldn’t climb back on. I just felt so frightened.” (17 year old)*

*“I don’t think anyone realised just how frightened and anxious I was. The problem just got bigger and bigger until I just couldn’t go anymore.” (17 year old)*

*“So many different people got involved and I just had to keep explaining the same thing over and over again to different people. It made me feel worse and worse about myself. No single person saw the whole picture of what I was going through.” (16 year old)*

*“I don’t miss how school was, I miss how it might have been and that makes me feel really sad. Learning at home takes away the anxiety I was feeling at school, but then other anxieties have begun at home too.” (17 year old)*

### **School attendance difficulties**

Many young people experienced such a high degree of anxiety that they struggled with **school attendance**. (This was an aspect that was explored later in the study with reference to Emotionally Based School Avoidance and Anxiety **EBSAA**). These families felt compelled to home educate for their child’s mental health and wellbeing.

Significant trauma, fear, self-harm and occasionally risk of suicide was discussed. For some parents their struggles had been going on for many years and the interview was the first time they had been able to share their full story with someone outside.

*"My son is now a late teenager, but our battle with school refusal began when they were age 6. We were told it was just separation anxiety and to push through it. It went on for years and years until eventually giving up and home schooling."* (Parent of 17 year old boy)

*"Everyday I drove my child to school, but they just couldn't get out of the car. My child was so anxious and afraid. After years and years of feeling I had to keep forcing my child through this because this was what was expected of me as parent I eventually stopped taking my child because their mental health was in sharp decline."* (Parent of 17 year old)

*"School mornings were just unbearable. I felt everyone was judging us from the outside and saying I was just a soft parent with no boundaries, but I couldn't physically get my child out of the car."*

Some parents described extreme and frightening behaviours when trying to get their child into school.

*"My child's fear about school just got bigger and bigger. One day on the way to school my child unlocked the seatbelt and opened the door of our moving car to try and jump out. It was terrifying."* (Mother of 14 year old)

*"One morning my child threw themselves down the stairs to avoid going to school."* (Father of 10 year old)

*"My child used to repeatedly hit their head against the radiator because they just couldn't go to school. It wasn't a choice, my child just couldn't go."* (Parent)

Access to help for children who were struggling with attendance for emotional and mental health reasons was discussed at length and with a high degree of frustration and upset. Parents described feeling judged and misunderstood.

*"I hate the word refusal. My child just couldn't do anything other than not go. My child wasn't being difficult or defiant, and I wasn't being a rubbish parent with no boundaries, we just needed help, but all we got was judgement."* (Parent)

*"When I told school I couldn't get my child into school they told me just to bring them in pyjamas. I had no support with my child's fear about school."* (Parent)

Families described how having formal attendance proceedings brought against them for their child's non-attendance caused significant anguish and further added to the struggles they were already having.

*"The school knew my child had really complex mental health problems that meant I couldn't get them into school, but they still sent an official letter telling me I would be prosecuted."* (Parent)

*"We were really struggling as a family. School knew we were struggling. They still sent an attendance letter."* (Parent)

*"The day I received an attendance letter from school I was devastated, my world came crashing down. I couldn't stop crying. It was as if no-one, no matter what I said or did, could every understand what we were going through, how much I wanted my child in school, but how little anyone cared or could do anything to help."* (Mother of 15 year old)



*“School were preoccupied with what code to use on the register for my child’s non-attendance. Once that was sorted, they didn’t care anymore about why my child wasn’t at school.” (Parent)*

*“We seriously have to question this notion of – go to prison or home educate your kids. It’s just not right!” Mother of 14 year old.*

## **Special Educational Needs**

In a significant number of cases, social, emotional and mental health issues were also complicated by a range of SEND issues, most notably autism. Many families felt they had exhausted all avenues of support for mental health issues or SEND. A significant number of families expressed a feeling that their child’s behaviour, situation or needs were misunderstood. The child often didn’t have a diagnosis or did not meet criteria for EHCP. These were the families who struggled most with making the decision to EHE and felt it was the only option left.

*“We struggled to get my child’s SEND needs recognised. My child was just viewed as having challenging behaviour, but they were actually struggling with undiagnosed autism and anxiety.”*

*“My child had really complex needs and there was just no consistency of provision in school. My child was treated as if they were misbehaving – school didn’t address the underlying issues.”*

*“My child struggled with dyslexia and as a result was put in lower sets with people they didn’t get on with. My child experienced bullying and began to isolate themselves.” (Parent of 15 year old)*

*“My child was continually coming home from school unhappy. They weren’t getting the support they needed. I felt my child’s needs weren’t recognised and we struggled to get EHCP.”*

## **Last resort**

Only a very small number of families felt they had made an active/elective choice to home educate. Most families did not want their child to be educated at home and felt they had made the choice to home educate as a last resort.

*“We got totally lost in the system. We don’t even know if our child has a diagnosis. We’ve gone from referral to referral, assessment after assessment, and a string of people not calling us back. We had no choice but to home educate.” (Mother of 14 year old)*

*“It was just such a horrendous situation – home education was a case of taking emergency measures.” (Mother)*

*“Home education was never a choice I could have imagined us making, but it was a total last resort.” (Parent)*

*“There was just nowhere left to turn for us. No-one could grasp the situation or help us. We were alone, no-one understood, there was no-where left to turn.”(Mother)*

*“Home-schooling is incredibly challenging for parents, it’s not an easy route to take, but it is better than the daily onslaught of trying to get our child into school. We had no choice but to do this.” (Mother)*

## **Dissatisfaction with the school system and curriculum**

In almost every interview, families and young people raised the issue of a narrow curriculum in mainstream school, exam pressure and lack of choice or ownership over direction of learning as a key reason for choosing EHE. For many families, EHE had opened up a more flexible and bespoke way of educating that better suited their child's needs, even if they had felt initially pressured to make the decision to home educate. Whilst only one family interviewed placed educational/philosophical reasons as their main motivation for choosing home education (without any reference to the other factors mentioned above), the majority of families who chose home education experienced positive change when they adopted a less pressured, alternative way of learning.

Mainstream school's focus on passing exams was discussed at length.

*"Schools focus on doing 10 GCSE's. There is just so much pressure to achieve this but it doesn't suit all pupils."*

*"Schools are just run like businesses. Schools have to perform, so kids have to perform. Sometimes it's just easier for schools not to have the complex kids in school."* (Mother of 15 year old)

*"There is just so much exam pressure in mainstream school. Education should be about preparing young people for life, not to pass exams."*

*"Schools are results driven. I'm sure school would have worked harder to keep my child in school if they had been academically brighter."*

For many families, home education was a way to educate differently and allow their child to determine the direction of their own learning. There were many examples given of how successfully this was working for their child. Parents described their children following a very diverse curriculum at home through entrepreneurship, cooking, art, history, computing, sign language and setting up businesses, as well as following online courses and national qualifications. Most notably these families talked about the life skills their children were learning at home.

*"My children just weren't stimulated at school. Home education has given us an opportunity to explore new ways of learning and different subjects such as entrepreneurship."* (Father of two)

*"Homeschooling can be tailored to my child's skills, interests and ability."*

*"The mainstream curriculum is just so archaic. The way we learn is changing and schools need to learn to move with this change."*

*"My child is becoming a much more rounded person learning from home. They are developing independence, they are able to look after themselves and make decisions."*

*"Children shouldn't have to follow a set path. They should be allowed to make choices. We should have more faith in children – trust them and give them more ownership of their learning."*

*"My child just didn't see the point in anything they were learning at school. They weren't being taught to love a subject or find out about it. It was such a narrow band of a curriculum."*

A research report conducted by University of Plymouth echoes some of the reflections offered by home educating parents in Hambleton and Richmondshire. A study about a family adopting an un-schooling philosophy of learning that follows the

interests of their children suggested that: *“Learning comes to these children as naturally as breathing, with parent and child working together pursuing questions or following an interest in much the same way as children learn before going to school. These children may not have completed standard assessment tests, nine GCSEs and three A-levels, but they are forging their own paths in life.”* (Bera Research Blog)

The research goes on to suggest that: *“Education as school has become a deficit model of learning whereby pupils must do well in standardised assessments in order to achieve in life. It is time to take stock and value education outside of the school gate, to recognise the interests and needs of the individual child and to move away from an overreliance on examination grades.”*

### **Family work patterns.**

For some families, the pandemic was a catalyst for choosing to educate differently. Family work patterns had changed and they were able to facilitate home education. This was more often the case with younger children and families, although this was more anecdotal.

*“I know families in our home education community who have enjoyed being with their children so much during Covid that they’ve totally re-prioritised their lives. Young families in particular are making lifestyle choices, I know people living in motorhomes and educating their children.”* (Mother of two primary age home-schoolers)

*“I may have put more pressure on school to met my child’s needs, but I was in a lucky enough position to be able to accommodate home education.”* (Mother of 7 and 9 year old)

*“We were moving area, it was the middle of Covid, we were both working from home, and it seemed the right thing to home-school until we were settled again.”* (Mother of 10 year old)

### **Refused flexi-schooling**

Almost every family interviewed had asked for **flexi-schooling** and all but one had been refused. This one family was granted flexi-schooling at primary school, but later had it refused at secondary. Although being refused flexi-schooling was rarely given as a main reason for choosing to home educate, it was frequently mentioned in interviews as a path families would have liked to have taken if it had been possible.

*“My child was suffering from extreme anxiety and depression and struggling to attend school. I asked school if we could take a term off just to re-set but was refused.”* (Mother of 14 year old)

*“If we had been offered flexi-schooling when we first started experiencing problems, we would not be where we are now with home education.”* (Parent)

*“My child wanted to be in school. All we needed was some flexibility to help us through this difficult time. We asked for flexi-schooling but were declined. Home education was the only other option.”*(Parent)

*“It would have really helped if school could have given us work to do from home for a period of time to help us, but they wouldn’t give it because our child might “get too used to it”.* (Parent)

### **Transitions**

The issue of transitions came up regularly in conversation with both school leaders and families. Key points of significant change, such as moving from primary to

secondary school, or even between year groups if friendship groups and routines are disturbed, can trigger anxiety and behaviour changes in young people that can ultimately lead to EHE.

*“There are so many small schools out in the Dales, it’s a very big jump to a large secondary after that.” (Parent of 2 primary age children)*

*“My child started school refusing at age 6. We just kind of hung on through primary, then they totally derailed when they hit secondary school.” (Parent of 17 year old boy)*

*“They just managed to cope through the first year of secondary, but then all the groups and classes changed when they went into Year 8 and they just couldn’t cope with the change.” (Parent of 17 year old)*

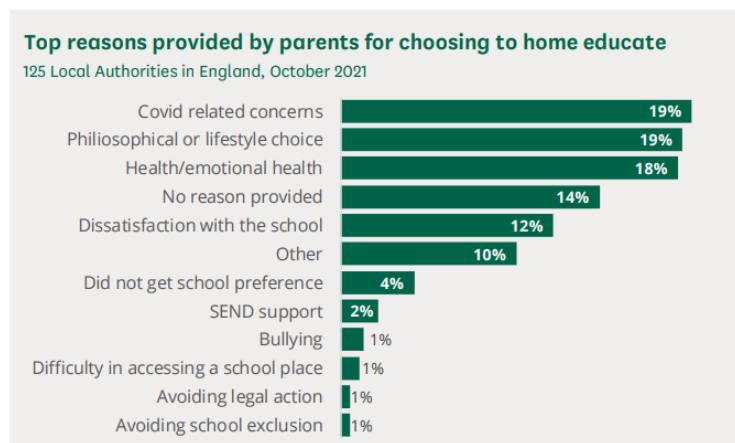
Covid lockdowns and school closures also added an unexpected and decidedly complex extra ‘transitions’ for children, when they were in and out of school and having to adapt not only to the change in learning style and pace from home, but also new rules and regulations about mixing and hygiene when they returned to school.

*“School was on and off and on and off through Covid, my daughter started to have severe panic attacks and suffer social anxiety and stress about being in and out of school.” (Parent of 16 year old)*

### National and regional data comparisons about reasons

ADCS research suggests health concerns relating to Covid-19 remained the most common reason nationally for parents choosing to electively home educate their child/ren, however the most recent survey saw a significant increase in the number of parents citing health or emotional health reasons. LAs also reported anxiety and mental health needs of children and young people as an increasingly common factor in parental decisions to electively home educate.

It is challenging to draw comparisons or parallels with national research on EHE, as the reasons given for choosing EHE in Hambleton and Richmondshire were complex and varied, with many factors overlapping and interconnected. Covid features much higher in the national picture as a reason for choosing EHE than it did for families interviewed in this research, however, philosophical reasons and emotional health feature high in both.



Source: ADCS, [Elective Home Education Survey: 2021](#), p5

## The barriers preventing children returning to school

The barriers identified to be preventing children returning to school are different depending upon the reasons EHE was chosen. Whilst many factors and characteristics are shared, to fully understand the barriers, it helps to view them through the lens of different groups of home educators;

- Those who have made an active, positive, elective choice, usually underpinned by educational philosophy.
- Those who have a more complex profile or schooling experience, likely including mental health issues or SEND
- Those who are completely disengaged from education, often involved in legal attendance proceedings or are missing from education.

All three of these distinct groups are challenging to penetrate for very different reasons. The fact that home-schooling families were so difficult to track down and communicate with for this research project, suggests how complex and deeply established the barriers are. The interviews and research revealed not just distinct groups of home-educators, but also a feeling of mistrust and judgment between them, schools and the Local Authority.

### **Barriers for those who have made an active, positive, elective choice.**

This group of home educators are generally younger families, who are well-established in the home-schooling community. Whilst many still have children with mental health or special educational needs, the choice to home educate has been made positively and is often underpinned by a genuinely held philosophy about alternative education. These families generally have clear beliefs about what their home education is setting out to achieve. Some provide a structured time-tabled approach to daily home education;

*“We get up early and start work. We have a weekly timetable and a specific room in our house to do our work.” (17 year old, home-educating for many years)*

Others choose a more child-led approach or adopt an ‘un-schooling’ philosophy

*“We don’t have a timetable, but we do have a routine and rhythm to our days. We structure the day around what our child’s needs and interests are, what support they need that day or what their mood is. We follow topics, learn languages online, visit museums and meet with other home-schoolers.” (Parent of a 9 and 10 year old)*

Interviews with these families were positive, passionate and inspiring. There are approximately 90 families registered on an active Facebook Group for Home Schooling in Richmondshire and over a thousand in the North Yorkshire Home-Educators Group. They are a vibrant and growing community and regularly meet to enjoy a full range of learning activities such as forest school, museum visits, art workshops, gardening and special interest groups. Children meet and socialise regularly. Some of these families are in, (what they referred to as) a privileged position of being financially stable and able to live off just one parent’s income; or able juggle home education around their own home-working. Others however,

including some single parents, are making significant financial sacrifices to be able to educate their children aligned with their philosophies and/or child's need.

Very few of these families rule out returning to mainstream school in the future, but most are content with the education they are providing for their children. They describe a full range of learning opportunities online and can access formal qualifications through online schools.

### **Mistrust and misconceptions**

Discussions about the barriers to re-engaging this group with mainstream schooling, were tentative and revealed a feeling of mistrust. Committed home-schooling families are often not registered with LA, especially if they have set out to home-school from pre-school age. If they are registered, they tend to engage very little. Whilst those that had engaged with the LA shared very positive experiences and valued the support they were offered, there was anecdotal evidence of a strong feeling in the home-school community of suspicion about what LA involvement could mean or lead to. One parent who had recently joined the home-schooling community said she was advised by other home school parents: *"Whatever you do, don't let them (the Local Authority) in your house."*

Fear of repercussions, fear of misunderstanding and fear of judgement are key barriers for this community of home educators, and these are deeply embedded. Even some of the most passionately committed home educators, expressed a feeling of shame for their education choices and a sense that they need to hide.

The proposed introduction of a mandatory register for all home educating families has for some families further added to this sense of mistrust. This has been echoed by voices from academics such as Dr Harriet Pattison, Home Education specialist and Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Liverpool Hope University, who warns that families who choose to home educate their children are *"facing unprecedented levels of 'misunderstanding and ignorance' in the face of new threats to their way of life."* Whilst home education families are being urged not to feel threatened by these proposals, fears that parents will face persecution and harassment and have their civil liberties eroded are echoed by the Home Education Community in Hambleton and Richmondshire, many of whom are petitioning against this register.

### **Philosophical differences**

The barriers for this group are also philosophical in nature. Many of these families referred to the narrow curriculum in mainstream school and the lack of opportunity for young people to forge their own path or follow their interests and passions. This is a current national debate and one that is influencing a national trend towards parents choosing alternative education provision. Once families have experienced success with educating at home, it could be challenging to convince them that mainstream schooling is a better option.

A perspective frequently adopted by schools is that home-schooling doesn't offer the opportunities for social interaction with a peer group and home-schooled children are deprived of these skills. The home-schooling community would argue that this is not

the case and that their children meet regularly with others and form strong friendships. Other wider studies have echoed this finding.

### **Barriers for those with a more complex profile or schooling experience.**

This group of home educators include some very vulnerable young people who have had challenging, and in some cases traumatic experiences, attending mainstream school. Each case is unique, with highly individualised circumstances, and usually includes a combination of mental health issues, SEND (both diagnosed and undiagnosed), emotionally-based school avoidance and attendance issues. Whilst this group present the most complex barriers, they are the group who generally had never imagined they would be home-educating and are most likely to return or re-engage in school if needs are met and the barriers removed. Only two families interviewed had successful experience of re-integration back into full-time school after a period of home-schooling, suggesting that overcoming the barriers for this group is challenging.

#### **Trauma**

Fear of further trauma for the young person is one of the biggest barriers experienced and expressed by this group of home educators.

*“We have had to adopt a process of unschooling to help our child recover from the trauma of school. He struggles to get out of bed in the morning, but we just have to let him find his way.” (Parent of 15 year old boy)*

*“My child is still processing the trauma of being forced to go to school, it’s been 3 years since they left to home educate, but the experience changed them and they have suffered so many mental health issues as a result. I wish I had taken them out of school sooner.” (Parent of 17 year old)*

*“Our first year of home educating has just been about recovering from the extended trauma of trying to get my child into school.” (Parent of 15 year old)*

One young people expressed a feeling of failure at having let themselves and others down.

*“I wish I could have done school. I wanted to go, I just couldn’t. I could never go back now. I still have nightmares about it.” (17 year old)*

Recovering from trauma can be a long and complex process. It is one that doesn’t necessarily fit in or around a traditional school day and often needs a bespoke and flexible approach supported by professionals. It is likely that from a medical perspective, treating the underlying trauma and mental health issues are the priority, and whilst re-integration back into school may form part of a treatment plan, it is likely going to need to offer extensive flexibility if this barrier is to be removed.

#### **Parental re-engagement**

The parental experience of the process of trying to find help for their children and finally choosing home educating was very significant in this study. One parent, a mother of a child, now finally back in mainstream education successfully completing a vocational post-16 course, explained the impact of this at length.



*"I felt so judged by school, professionals and other parents, especially when my child was young and at primary school. All the parents would be looking at me and thinking I was a bad parent. School just said I had to keep pushing through, which I did for many years, even though my instincts were telling me my child needed something different. I found myself having to lie about why my child wasn't in school and have to hide what we were going through. I felt locked in a world with my child and I didn't feel I could tell anyone what it was like without being judged. I felt ashamed and experienced periods of self-doubt and guilt. I would go to work in tears and just felt so isolated. It became too tiring to explain and re-explain to different professionals over and over again. I was so torn and pulled in so many different directions. My natural relationship with my child was skewed by pressure from others and I just doubted everything I was doing. Eventually I found the courage to put my child's needs first. I stopped listening to all the professionals and all their different perspectives and started listening to my child and put their needs first. I found the courage to say no and finally took them out of school."*

It was evident through many of the in-depth interviews with parents that they had experienced significant mental health issues and, in some cases, repeated trauma themselves, from having gone through often long and drawn-out processes of trying to get their child to attend school, or had formal legal proceedings or safeguarding concerns raised against them. Trying to re-engage parents and regain trust after feeling judged or ashamed is a significant barrier.

### **Communication breakdown over process**

Due to the emotive nature of some of the experiences of families, in some cases communication breakdown with the school became almost inevitable. Both schools and families expressed frustration and ambiguities about the process of choosing EHE. Some schools described a clear process of meetings and finally referral to the LA, some families described no meetings or paperwork at all. The lack of clarity around procedure added to communication breakdown and ultimately creating a significant barrier about re-engagement in fulltime mainstream school.

*"We told school we wanted to home educate and weren't even contacted back. We registered our child with the LA ourselves."* (Mother of 14 year old)

*"We were made to feel ashamed about the choices we made for our child. By the end there as just no-one we could trust to talk to at school."* (Parent)

*"I don't feel we had any help at all from school about making the decision to home educate. We registered ourselves with the LA, school gave us no guidance at all."* (Parent)

*"I'm just furious with both school and the LA to be honest."* (Parent of 15 year old)

*"We got a three-line letter when we finally chose EHE."* (Parent of 14 year old)

*"The 15 day-rule wasn't adhered to by school. Some work was given, but boundaries were blurred."* (Parent)

*"There was such a reluctance to offer work for my child after they had been absent for 15 days. It was as if we were hugely in the wrong even thinking to ask for it."* (Parent)

*"We asked school for a part-time timetable. It was agreed but never put in place."* (Parent)

### **Lack of flexibility about attendance**

The need for flexibility for both learning delivery and school attendance was a key issue raised by families who had chosen EHE, and the lack of it a significant barrier for those who may wish to re-engage with school. As described in the previous section about the reasons for choosing EHE, several parents had requested a



flexible approach to learning, either through part-time timetabling, online learning, a period of time away from school or a formal arrangement for flexi-schooling.

The ambiguity around where this sits alongside how attendance is recorded is a barrier from the perspective of both schools and families. Fear of formal attendance procedures was still high for many families.

### **Inconsistency of support**

During interviews, it was evident that young people and their families had tried and exhausted many different avenues and pathways for support. Having to explain their situation, either in writing, in form-filling or verbally explaining over and over again, had added further stress to an already challenging situation. Many of these children did not meet the eligible criteria for EHCP, and whilst they often had an IEP, they were not held to with the rigour of EHCP. A lack of formal diagnosis also proved difficult for some, and sometimes this led to being unable to access help and support through services such as the Medical Education Service.

Interviews and wider research suggested it was not uncommon for a young person or family to have seen many different professionals with varying levels of expertise in their quest to find support before finally opting for EHE. One family, in the space for 3 years of difficulty attending school, had encountered over 15 different professionals through school and external services.

*“I just wanted one person who really understood, but no-one seemed to. I just had to keep explaining it all over again every time I went to someone new. Each time it just made everything worse not better.” (17 year old)*

*“Everyone we spoke to had a different perspective. It just became so tiring trying to explain. No-one seemed to understand.” (Mother of two children with SEND)*

### **Barriers for those completely disengaged from school or missing in education**

First-hand evidence from this group is extremely challenging to come by and conclusions have been drawn from largely anecdotal evidence. Throughout the research, narratives were communicated from both schools and the home-education community about children they knew who were out of school and not accessing any form of education. In two cases the child was ‘working’ on the family farm, others were reported to be just at home and playing online, and some schools knew of families who were part of the traveller community.

Sometimes these children have been previously registered with a school, other times they have never been registered. There is an ongoing controversy among national bodies about how to define Children Missing Education, what characterises this group of children and how they are identified. The number of children not accessing formal education is unknown and estimates based on Local Authority data are likely inaccurate or unreliable due to the challenging task of identifying them.

The barrier for this group of children – some of whom have officially declared EHE to leave the education system or escape legal fines for non-attendance (this is anecdotal from schools), is simply being able to identify and locate them, before any

process of re-engagement can begin. This is by far the most challenging group to re-engage, and raises a number of safeguarding issues.

### **Barriers from the perspective of school leaders**

'Barriers to learning' is a key phrase used in schools currently, particularly with reference to children with SEND and their ability to access classroom content according to their learning differences or levels of need. Interviews with senior leaders revealed a high level of effective practice, expertise, innovation and policy with removing barriers to learning so their school and curriculum is as accessible and inclusive as possible to all pupils.

When questioned specifically about barriers preventing children returning to school following EHE, the responses from leaders were less clear. Every senior leader interviewed said their doors were always open if pupils wanted to return and they would do everything they could to meet need, however, all the initial reasons for leaving remained a significant challenge. Generally, from a school perspective, discussion about barriers focussed largely around the complexities of attendance accountability, part-time timetabling and flexi-schooling. Responses sometimes depended on the experience or seniority of the member of staff interviewed. Headteachers for example had a stronger understanding of the implications of flexi-schooling and attendance, whilst pastoral managers were less clear about policy and process but highly knowledgeable about targeted support once back in school.

Secondary schools had seen EHE figures on the rise, but also seen their exclusion figures go significantly up. The correlations and reasons for both are hard to unpick, indicating again that each case can be uniquely different to another, making generalisations and conclusions about barriers challenging. What is a barrier to one young person, could be an inclusive factor for another. The key it seems to identifying barriers from a school's perspective is having a policy in place that prioritises the individual. This was seen as easier in smaller schools than larger ones.

Senior leaders in most schools demonstrated deep understanding and empathy for those who had felt forced into EHE. They knew what kind of help was needed, but so many aspects such as finances, staffing, geography, size of school, attendance, policy, exams etc needed to align to enable the young person and family to build a bridge back to school, it felt impossible to know where to start with removing barriers, particularly when coupled with the lack of support for mental health.

Valuable insights were expressed by the Pupil Referral Service (PRS) who are uniquely placed to bring deep insights into overcoming barriers. Their knowledge and expertise at re-engaging dis-engaged pupils is hugely valuable to EHE research and debate, however, like the parents interviewed, the PRS find positive progress made through specialised programmes often only has a short term benefit, if the school's policies and procedures are not flexible enough to continue the support in a way that was working for the young person. Significant progress could be made in PRS, or private provision or through a successful circuit-breaking period of EHE to re-engage a young person, only to find that once they are back into a school learning environment that doesn't neatly align with or adhere the approaches that were

working, it could set the whole cycle back in motion again. Like with mainstream school leaders, there was frustration expressed, that systems at county or school policy level actually jeopardise positive progress made.

## Flexi-schooling

Flexi-schooling is an arrangement between the parent and the school whereby the child is registered at the school but attends part-time. When not in school, the child is educated at home. It differs from part-time or reduced timetabling, which is often put in place as a short-term measure with a view to returning to fulltime attendance as soon as possible. A flexi-schooling arrangement can be for short or long term, and is a decision made at the discretion of the headteacher - there is no legal right to flexi-schooling and parents cannot appeal against a decision if it isn't granted. Schools receive full funding for children who are flexi-schooled and remain responsible for their educational outcomes.

Whilst the number of children flexi-schooling in the UK remain low, it is thought that the numbers are growing. There has been little research to date about flexi-schooling, however, a review carried out by The Relationships Foundation in Jan 22 has made some key recommendations to the DFE for UK flexi-schooling policy and practice including clarity over procedure, agreement about attendance codes and a deeper understanding about the motivations for flexi-schooling specifically for SEND pupils. The report suggests:

*“Head-teachers need to consider whether granting a flexi-schooling arrangement for a child with known or suspected SEND may enable a less stressful and more manageable routine, better educational and behavioural outcomes, and — perhaps counter-intuitively — stronger inclusion. Flexi-schooling may not always be appropriate, and it may only occasionally be requested by parents, but there needs to be greater awareness among schools, trusts and Local Authorities as to the potential benefits of flexi-schooling, and proper consideration of this ‘co-production’ arrangement as an early and pupil-centred SEND intervention.”*

Complexity around the legalities and processes of flexi-schooling, and misunderstandings about what constituted as a flexi-schooling arrangement, was highlighted in this research. Many senior leaders understood the term flexi-schooling to mean part-time timetabling, others had not heard of the term, and some dismissed it out of hand as being too complex to arrange.

This response to flexi-schooling from schools was echoed in the parental experience. All but one family interviewed had been refused flexi-schooling, and every parent interviewed would have wanted to explore a flexi-schooling arrangement had it been offered.

One family interviewed had been granted flexi-schooling at their local Richmondshire primary and spoke highly of the experience. They developed an agreed curriculum with the school and agreed days they would attend school and days they would learn at home. The family and children felt this worked extremely well, the school was highly supportive of their choice and valued the child-led approach to education the children were receiving at home. The family hoped to continue this provision at secondary school, but were refused. This led to the family choosing fulltime EHE.

## **TIG Federation: Adopting Flexi-Schooling Case Study**

There are a growing number of schools offering or specialising in flexi-schooling nationally, and TIG Federation, which is comprised of Kirk Hammerton, Staveley and Long Marston Primary Schools is one of these.

The TIG Federation has gone through a number of structural changes over the last few years, including formal federation processing, an interim leadership arrangement and a new headteacher. Flexi-schooling policy and process was already in place before the new headteacher took up post and there is now a newly updated flexi-schooling policy which has been agreed and approved by the governing body. Flexi-schooling policy sits alongside all other policies on the school website and is overtly recognised as a legal pathway for education.

Flexi-schooling began at the school in response to a request from a parent whose child had severe medical needs. The request was granted by the headteacher and a policy was written and put in place. Following this request, the message that the school had developed this policy got out to the home education community and many requests were made. This pattern of provision is now embedded in policy and practice and some families travel significant distances to access it.

The headteacher believes the key to success of flexi-schooling at TIG is having absolute clarity in policy and procedure, with the best interest of the child's educational needs at its heart. Parents who request flexi-schooling at TIG go through a clear process and procedure including a parental agreement form, lengthy discussion with school, ample opportunity to refine thinking and consider the full picture of the home-school environment, and ultimately how flexi-schooling could best benefit the child. Flexi-schooling is subject to a clear review cycle and parents are made fully aware of the responsibility they are undertaking to education their child at home when they are not in school.

This process is now both rigorous and effective and the headteacher has identified a number of benefits from overtly adopting flexi-schooling policy.

- Flexi-schooling has helped some children who had difficulty attending school eg emotionally-based school avoidance, remain registered rather than losing them to full-time EHE.
- Flexi-schooling has enabled long-term home-schoolers to access mainstream provision.
- Strong learning relationships have been established with parents as school and home take a shared approach to attainment and preparing for transition to high school.
- A bridge has been built to a group of families with a long-standing tradition of home education who want a more balanced, holistic approach to learning.
- From a safeguarding perspective, children who may otherwise have been unregistered or missing education are registered at school.
- The numbers of families making requests for flexi-schooling and the distances some of them are prepared to travel, suggest the school is meeting need.

Whilst flexi-schooling is embedded in policy and practice at the school, this pattern of educational provision is still a learning journey for all stakeholders, which requires significant courage and a depth of understanding about personalised curriculums and the benefit to the child. The most significant challenges in adopting flexi-schooling policy have, and in some cases continue to be:

- Reporting attendance in a way that does not reflect negatively on the school eg having the right attendance code (the schools now report their flexi-schooling child attendance separately)
- School prioritise closing gaps in learning, but many families opting for flexi-schooling have a different set of educational philosophies and values which can sometimes cause discord.
- Curriculum planning and delivery has to be carefully structured to ensure gaps don't develop when the child is not in school – this is especially significant in areas such as phonics.
- As a federation of small schools, finding funding to support their plight, especially with pastoral provision can be challenging.

Flexi-schooling works for pupils, families and staff at TIG schools, however, it is important to recognise that flexi-schooling could be more easily facilitated, and able to be successful in these schools, because of their small cohorts. That doesn't mean that small schools find this route of educational provision easy, but more likely that leadership teams and staff in small schools have a lot of expertise in teaching and learning for mixed-year groups and devising flexible rolling curriculum programmes. Small schools often attract families with children with SEND/SEMH issues and therefore working closely with families to develop bespoke, personalised learning packages for children is something they are innately familiar with and skilled at, despite very small numbers of staff and very little funding.

Whilst larger schools, and secondary in particular, may find the logistics of this approach significantly challenging, the model of flexi-schooling adopted in this federation of schools presents a valuable opportunity to explore what happens when dialogue around EHE, flexi-schooling and children missing education, is opened up overtly and confidently addressed through policy, process and practice.

## Recommendations

The challenges associated with locating families and gaining trust to open up about experience for this research, coupled with the actual content of the narratives from both families and school leaders, suggests that a significant mindset shift about EHE would be beneficial to address the growing numbers of families choosing this route in Hambleton and Richmondshire.

The research revealed high levels of mistrust between key groups of participants, and concerning numbers of young people and their families having experienced significant levels of stress, and in many cases trauma, as they move to EHE. Schools believe the best place for children to learn is in school, and the majority of

families interviewed claimed never to have chosen or 'elected' to educate their child at home. What lies between these positions from families and schools, is where recommendations need to be focussed:

### **Acknowledgement and recognition at strategic level**

EHE is rarely discussed in schools until it is being chosen by a parent as an option or when increasing numbers have become a problem. As long as dialogue about EHE remains off the main agenda in schools, the concern is the numbers will continue to quietly grow. Parents revealed feelings of shame associated with their path towards EHE. This suggests it is an area that has been shrouded in darkness, confusion and complexity for some time. Addressing this with open, honest debate, and enabling a positive discourse through which to talk about EHE (even down to the terminology of EHE itself) is a key recommendation.

Whilst research revealed many on-the-ground, practical measures and excellent examples of inclusive practice to help children reintegrate back into school, this study suggests the most significant place to start is at strategic policy level. This may include:

- Clear policy, procedure and signposting about the process of embarking on EHE or flexi-schooling in schools for all stakeholders.
- Recognition of the reasons influencing EHE in attendance policy
- Holistic, whole school or whole academy trust mental health strategies, policies and action plans, which specifically include issues around EHE.
- Regularly including EHE on governing body agendas, tailored to the school demographic and community.
- Using a relational approach to develop a discourse in schools through which to talk about EHE in a positive way.

School leaders were generally deeply concerned about EHE numbers and in most cases showed high degrees of empathy about the reasons their families chose to leave their setting. If the genuine desire from senior leaders is to understand and support families through the complex factors around choosing EHE, then they must firstly be enabled and protected by progressive policy and have their plight reflected, recognised and embedded at a strategic level.

### **Flexibility and personalised approaches**

Developing **flexible practice** is central to all of the above, and the lack of it lies at the heart of the barriers of returning to school described by both families and senior leaders. The experiences of the families interviewed were highly individualised, but a common theme was if school policy had been able to be flexible enough to accommodate need, EHE may not have been chosen.

Among the interviews with school leaders, the research revealed varying degrees of fear about flexible approaches, with some senior leaders suggesting that if you have flexible policies, particularly in the area of attendance or flexi-schooling policy, it may place the school in a vulnerable position and unable to meet demand. The

experience of flexi-schooling at TIG Federation, was when word ‘got out’ about offering flexi-schooling, there was an initial flood of requests. It took courage from leaders to ride this wave, and through clarity of procedure and process, and a depth of understanding about meeting child need, gain a hold of it in a way that worked for their whole school community and maintain balance.

The danger is if all schools fear ‘opening the floodgates’ by adopting flexible working practices, it only pushes that body of water elsewhere. In the case of EHE, that body of water is more often than not an increasing number of vulnerable children, who are being channelled into home education.

Whilst developing flexible, bespoke and bespoke educational provision for individuals may be seen as logistically challenging in school, the educational settings that have been successful in reintegrating pupils or preventing them leaving for EHE in the first place, have been the ones that have a clear philosophy of personalised learning approaches and a courageous or creative mindset about how to meet the challenges posed by those with a complex mental health or SEND profile. These flexible practices include:

- Creative use of technology eg telepresence classroom robots (one family interviewed spoke highly of how the robot had enabled their child to attend school when the only other alternative would have been EHE)
- Using experience of remote learning during Covid to develop blended approaches to learning at home and school.
- Embedding mental health and enrichment in curriculum design.
- Re-structuring pastoral systems and support to proactively address difficulties accessing external services.
- Developing and adopting formal flexi-schooling policy.
- Comprehensive transition programmes between primary and secondary, and also between year groups.
- Whole school trauma-informed approaches and Thrive.
- Recognition of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Mainstream schools could also learn valuable lessons from alternative provision and Pupil Referral Units who have a rich tool kit of expertise and resources to draw on to re-engage children who have a complex pattern of attendance, combined with school avoidance, SEND and other behavioural problems. Again, opening up the debates, overtly addressing the issues and drawing expertise together from across the Richmondshire and Hambleton area could mark the beginning of a dynamic working network to address the growing numbers of EHE from an enlightened position.

### **Early insight and preventative measures**

One of the limitations of this research was the lack of input from primary schools, and yet, for many of the participating young families, this is where their narratives began. Having policies and practices in place early on in a child’s journey through school, that overtly and directly address the pre-determined ‘risk’ factors associated with children leaving to pursue EHE, would mean complex issues that arise later can be tackled at the root. **High quality training**, with consistent messages to all

stakeholders, could help with taking preventative measures and embedding deep understanding of the issues and risk factors associated with EHE.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) training is a key example. EBSAA is a term used to describe children and young people who have severe difficulty attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school. For many of the families interviewed, attendance difficulties were a key issue before they decided to home educate and many families revealed having been met with misunderstanding about the difficulties their children were having with attendance.

EBSAA training is aimed at helping educators understand some of the deeper issues associated with school avoidance and identify risk factors, including some of the more subtle ones that were often described by parents in interviews. Having EBSAA training embedded in CPD programmes in schools would enable all staff to have a common understanding about how to identify early signs of school avoidance and consistent approaches, messages and dialogues to adopt when dealing with both pupils and parents.

### **Positive engagement with the home education community**

Understanding how home-educators fall into loosely defined groups, often but not exclusively determined by the reasons for their choices, could be an important step to de-mystifying this multi-faceted community and breakdown some of the commonly held misconceptions that often act as barriers.

Whilst it is important to deeply acknowledge and understand the emotional narratives of the families interviewed in this research, it is also important to value the depth of knowledge, expertise and passion they have about education, parenting, mental health, SEND, curriculum and policy. These families and young people, particularly those with more complex profiles, are the ones who have experienced the impact of policies and procedures first hand. Their voice is really significant in understanding the reasons for such a rise in EHE and a key recommendation of this research is to take positive action to build a bridge of trust between schools/LA and the home education community.

The experience of many EHE families interviewed was they felt they needed to hide, and this was evident in the difficulty experienced trying to contact them for research. Some are anecdotally hiding for fear of attendance procedures, others for fear of the LA enforcing check-ups or procedures, and others have experienced so much trauma and shame that they feel they need to keep a low profile or that their alternative approach would be judged negatively.

A dominant member of the home-education community acknowledged that there were many families in Hambleton and Richmondshire who would be unlikely to engage in LA or school events were they offered, but many more who would actively attend events if significant time was spent in positive communication and gradually building trust.

The recent report 'What support would home educating parents welcome' by education charity Education Otherwise offers some useful insights into the types of



support and activities that would engage and build bridges with the home education community. The range of support measures considered in the report include; provision and funding for external examination fees, providing worksheets, workbooks and computer equipment, helping with college placements and provision of SEN resources. The report suggested varying degrees of need for these support avenues within the home education community, however support with access to places such as libraries, galleries and museums featured highly. This research study found the home education community are very active in Richmondshire and Hambleton and always looking for places to go for meet-ups, workshops and experiences. There is potential here for schools to open their doors, philosophically and physically removing barriers through perhaps:

- Running curriculum-based workshops specifically for home-educating children/families in schools.
- Hire out spaces/rooms in schools or LA buildings free of charge or at minimal cost to run home education events.
- Offer talks or workshops from curriculum experts/teachers in school to home-educating parents about teaching and learning.
- Value the home education community by inviting experienced home-educators into schools/LA meetings to share their educational expertise with school staff, especially with regard to personalised learning approaches and entrepreneurship.
- Develop a working party or task force that brings together different groups and stakeholders to listen and build bridges.
- If a child has left to EHE, continue sending updates from school and invite to events.

Developing a dialogue, ideally face-to-face, through creative and relational approaches is something many of those interviewed would consider, if they knew it was coming from a place of understanding, acknowledgement and acceptance.

### **A place to go**

By far the most vulnerable group highlighted in this research, is the young people who have complex SEMH/SEND profiles, but don't meet the criteria for EHCP and are therefore limited in the support they can access. If previous support measures have failed, either through the wrong person, the wrong time, inconsistent support, or issues related to the pandemic, it can be even harder to press the reset button and re-engage, particularly if trust has broken down with the family. These young people have seemingly no place to go, other than to turn to the home education community. In some cases this is the turning point for re-engagement with learning and they join like-minded families with similar philosophies and their learning pathways are re-directed and re-ignited. In other cases, these young people are isolated at home, accessing little education or support.

The geography of Hambleton and Richmondshire was mentioned frequently throughout the research, and its sparsity of support over such large areas. From senior leader's perspectives, access to the Medical Education Service is limited or only short term, and whilst access arrangements have changed and children no longer need to supply a consultant's letter, many other organisations such as Nudge

Education who are able to provide bespoke alternative approaches require an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) to access support.

Provision is gradually developing to meet need however, with some schools for example opening new specialist Hubs, and the Principle Teachers Hub in Catterick Garrison has expansion plans to accommodate more young people. As it stands however, this research suggests that at the absence of a place to go once school has become troublesome is driving families into EHE, and for many, the active Home Education Community are providing the physical and emotional spaces needed.

### **Positive relationships and holistic oversight**

One of the recurring themes throughout interviews was the frustration, and often anguish, experienced by both parents and young people at having to explain and re-explain their experience or situation repeatedly to different professionals with varying degrees of expertise, understanding or empathy. Most participants who are registered with the LA described positive experiences and relationships with LA advisors, but these professionals are usually the last ones in a long line of referrals and tribunals.

The lack of one or two key professionals having holistic oversight and acting as advocate for both the parent and child from a deep place of understanding was a key reason why families felt misunderstood, judged and exhausted with their journey, finally then turning to EHE. Having designated professionals to oversee all aspects of all affected individuals has significant practical and financial implications, but clarity of policy and procedure mentioned earlier however, could go further to include specific time periods for discussing possible EHE and opportunities for all stakeholders and agencies involved to talk to each other and make educational decisions unilaterally with the child's needs at the heart.

Inconsistency of support was also a key factor, and it was not uncommon for an approach to be working for a young person, and then staff changes, timetable changes, agreed techniques not adhered to or a strong opinion or judgement loudly voiced, to derail the young person almost as soon as they step over the threshold of school, setting the re-integration process back to square one. Metaphorically and physically stepping over the threshold back into school can be, for both parents and pupils, a pivotal moment that can determine the direction of the child's educational journey. Done well, at the right time, with deep understanding and expertise, and a key person who knows the child's narrative and can help navigate and maintain consistency of approach, reintegration can and does work. But it takes time. In the cases of EBSAA, it could take up to a year or more of tentative steps, with a trusted person.

Positive relationships, whether between educational establishments, organisations, groups of home educators or staff and pupils, are key, with trusted relationships with parents being some of the most fundamental of all to reintegrate families and young people back into mainstream education.

## Conclusion

Whilst all schools keep their doors firmly open for any young person who is home-educating to return, once a child has physically and bureaucratically left fulltime school, regardless of the reason for departure, the journey back can be tumultuous, and one requiring deep understanding, insight, empathy, resources, time and flexibility. This has been the key narrative from the families interviewed for this research study, and perhaps these issues will be even more urgent to address if the proposed statutory register goes ahead and unregistered children need to be accounted for.

Shifting mindsets, addressing misconceptions and building lost trust is a complex process that takes time to address and finally embed. That said, opening up the debate and adopting the position that all parties are on the same side of educating all children in the very best way possible to meet their individual and collective needs, is a significant step. This, combined with research-informed, targeted approaches, and sharing and using best practice from both the locality and further afield could ignite swift change and yield positive outcomes.

## Appendix and references

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