

Matter Arising from the Overview and Scrutiny Meeting on 23 January 2018.

Following the publication of the minutes of the last meeting the Virtual School received a complaint from a Home Educating Parent, supported by her Elected Member Mr Gary Cowan, and having considered the comments made, I would like to clarify a statement made in the report.

On page 98 of the paper bundle the report states:

'Wokingham context:

As part of the development of the Virtual School and its remit to oversee the effectiveness of education for our most vulnerable learners, an Education Coordinator has been in post as of the 1st January 2016. This role has the specific remit to oversee EHE. Prior to this the role was part of the Education Welfare Service. We have effective processes in place for notifications and maintain a register of EHE families and carers.'

This paragraph was included with the intention of placing a context around the employment and positioning of the EHE officer within the LA structure. IT was not intended as a comment on the safety or vulnerability of all Electively Home Educated (EHE) children.

While it is true that the key priority of the Virtual School is 'to oversee the effectiveness of education for the most vulnerable learners', this does not mean that all children who are electively home educated, or registered with the Virtual school, are vulnerable and I apologise if the poor choice of wording led anyone to believe that this was our intent or belief. The vast majority of the parents choosing to home educate do indeed provide for their children extremely well and there are no safeguarding concerns for them.

To put this in context, as of today there are 140 children registered as being home educated. Of these only 9 are in receipt of Family Assessment, Early help, a Child in Need or a Child protection plan. This equates to approximately 6 % of all EHE children registered at this time.

As noted in the minutes of the last meeting,
'Lisa Humphreys pointed out that it is only in a small minority number of cases there has been a safeguarding issue.'

The correspondent was extremely unhappy that we used the word 'our' children when referring to those who are electively home educated. The use of the term 'our' was intended to identify all children in the Wokingham Borough Council area for whom the LA hold statutory responsibilities. In this case we include those electively home educated as the LA also retains a statutory duty under Section 437(1) of the Education Act 1996, local to intervene if it appears that parents are not providing a suitable education. The Local Authority also retains the right to act if there is evidence of a safeguarding risk or concern for a child. Both of these duties apply to all children in 'our' (LA) Wokingham area.

We fully recognise that parents retain sole responsibility for their children, particularly where they elect to home educate however as stated in the last meeting we do hold this in balance with our statutory duties.

The correspondent also wished Members to be clearly sited on the fact that parents who choose to electively home educate are under no legal compulsion to engage with the Local Authority and are within their rights to decline visits and meetings or to engage in correspondence.

In summary, children who are electively home educated are not automatically designated as 'vulnerable' because of a parental choice to home educate. While the register of home educated children is held, for strategic reasons, within the Virtual School, children are deemed to be safe unless and until specific evidence is presented to the contrary.

Moving forward the Virtual school will be undertaking the regular review of the EHE policy next term: we have invited the correspondent to work with us in that review and consultation process.

Shan Ratcliffe

Head of Virtual School
Wokingham Borough Council.

Section 437(1) of the Education Act 1996

This section states that:

"If it appears to a local education authority that a child of compulsory school age in their area is not receiving suitable education, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise, they shall serve a notice in writing on the parent requiring him to satisfy them within the period specified in the notice that the child is receiving such education."