

## **Notes of Elective Home Education Focus Group held at South West Teachers' Centre, Enniskillen on Tuesday 27 May 2014 at 2.00 pm**

### **In Attendance**

Four home educating parents  
A parent who is considering home educating  
Two children who are currently home educated  
Pat Ward, Head of Corporate Services, WELB

### **Introduction**

Pat welcomed consultees to the Focus Group and outlined the aims of the consultation, which are to provide an opportunity for all present to put forward their concerns, fears, hopes and any other issues in respect of the draft policy. Pat emphasised that the policy is at a draft stage and that it would be important for the policy writers to consider the views of all stakeholders. Pat went on to clarify her role as impartial facilitator of the Focus Group, as someone who was not involved in drawing up the draft policy but who would feedback in an impartial manner any views expressed by consultees.

Pat then proceeded to consider the policy under 7 key headings.

### **1. Legislative Background**

Pat began by referring to Article 45 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 which states that parents have a right to Home Educate. She then went on to explain the responsibility of Boards under Article 44. At this point, Pat was requested by a consultee to explain what exactly was meant by specific words in the legislation, including 'aptitude' and 'ability'. On explaining that her role as impartial facilitator was not to attempt to explain the detail of the legislation or the draft policy, Pat was reproached by another consultee for not answering specific questions.

At this point, Pat reiterated her role as impartial facilitator – to listen to consultee opinions and to feed back in as clear and honest a manner as possible. Pat asked that consultees use the two hour period in the intended way which would be to their own benefit. Pat also requested that those present were treated with mutual respect throughout the duration of the Focus group.

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of legislative background:

- It was noted that the legislation is extremely vague and out of date, with no definition of terms. The legislation clearly states that the parent is responsible for their child's education – the Board has no right of access. The legislation has been misinterpreted in the draft policy.
- It was agreed that it is really impossible to evaluate the draft policy. It is not well written – it is not good – it misinterprets the legislation. It appears to have been drafted very hastily – it should be scrapped and a completely new one drawn up.
- The current policy is ok - why is it changing? People are very happy with the current system of elective advice and support.

- It was pointed out that children can still socialise when they are being home educated.
- The policy misinterprets Schedule 13 – it omits the reference to ‘where it appears’. This means the Board can interfere only where there is evidence that something is wrong, however this applies right across the whole of society not just not for home education.
- One parent, who is considering home education, pointed out that the draft policy would put her off having anything to do with the Board.
- It was noted that Education Authorities in England have a similar legal framework but the tone of their policies is much better. They are there to support, not inspect. Lancashire has a very good policy which the Boards should emulate (Pat said she is familiar with the Lancashire Policy which she will include in the consultation feedback).
- It was queried whether legal advice was sought for the draft policy.

## 2. Safeguarding

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of safeguarding:

- One parent expressed that she felt she is being vilified as a mother; that home education should be recognised as a positive thing. If the legislators and Board spent time with home educators they would see the value of it – they would see that ‘we do it because we love our children’ – then safe guarding isn’t an issue.
- There was general agreement that the Safeguarding part of the policy was misplaced.
- Whilst recognising that safeguarding of children is important, it was felt that the draft policy puts safeguarding at the forefront, which intimidates and vilifies home educators.
- It was pointed out that education is an entirely separate issue from welfare – this is not clear in the draft policy. How does the Board ensure that children are safe after school, whilst doing homework? It is not their concern – neither should home education.
- It was suggested that safeguarding could be more of an issue in school. One parent specifically said that he ‘didn’t trust schools’.
- The majority of consultees said that they would be happy for their child to use after school facilities.
- It was suggested that the draft policy had echos of the Badman Review, which was widely discredited.
- It was suggested that the draft policy is at risk of blurring the lines of responsibility and specific functions of different agencies such as Social Services and Education. This could be very dangerous as children who really do need protection could slip through the net.
- It was queried whether **every** home will be open to inspection every year or just homes where children are home educated.
- It was noted that home education is being put on trial – that parents should not have to be accountable to Boards.

## 3. Procedures for Elective Home Education

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of procedures:

- It was agreed that the new policy promotes more of a policing role as opposed to a supportive role. It is insulting to home educators. What is being proposed is quite intimidating. The draft policy takes control away from the parent - It assumes everything is wrong when a parent home educates – the Board wants to control it.
- It was pointed out that other WELB information is also inaccurate and misinterprets the law (Pat was provided with a copy of the WELB leaflet 'A brief Guide to School Attendance').
- One parent strongly exerted that it needs to be recognised that education is decided by the parent. He pointed out that his reasons for home educating are because none of his child's needs were being met by the school. He claimed that schools aren't good enough, that his child was bullied, but the school couldn't fix it. He feels that schooling is state indoctrination of children, both in respect of the way they're taught and what they're taught. He added that the focus is completely wrong and that it is schools and not parents that need to get it right.
- A point was made in relation to children moving year groups and schools at a specific age regardless of their stage of learning/ability. Home schooling permits learning which is not age related but based on ability and level of education.
- It was questioned how Principals and Board Officers could assess whether or not a child is receiving an 'efficient full time education appropriate to his or her age, ability and aptitude', particularly where they don't know the child, their ability or level of development – the same measures should not be applied to home schooling as is applied in schools. Compulsory school age is 4 – this is too young for some kids.
- It was queried whether it is appropriate for children to be asked for their views – is there an age limit? Do the parents not know best? Do schools ask children for their views?

#### **4. Children with SEN**

The following points /concerns were raised in respect of children with SEN:

- It was pointed out that every child has SEN, and the best way to meet their needs are in the home. Schools have so many statemented children now – they are being let down by the system – they get on better at home where their real individual needs are recognised and met.
- Home educators should be able to opt to get an SEN assessment 'voluntarily' – this can't be enforced.
- How can the needs of an SEN child be assessed by a yearly visit?
- It was noted that Special Needs are all very different – even Grammar schools have SEN pupils. SEN support takes years to address in school and the education of other children can be affected in a classroom situation. Home schooling provides the opportunity for one-to-one interaction which is more beneficial to an SEN child.

## **5. Minimum Standards**

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of minimum standards:

- It was suggested that it is impossible to draw up objective criteria for standards for home education. Whilst schools teach children according to age, home schooling can provide for differentiation according to individual child needs and ability – these will be different for every child.
- It was suggested that the draft policy demands a standard from parents that we don't get from schools.
- It was queried who decides if something is wrong and how? The draft policy has no appeals process.
- How are objective minimum standards identified for moral issues?
- It was noted that it is not the Board's duty to judge the programme of work for home education - many parents could take the Board to court.
- It was pointed out that a recent enquiry into our school system found that there is 'much to be done' and 1 in 5 of our Primary children don't reach expected levels. Why are home educators being targeted when they are doing a better job than schools?

## **6. Support for Home Educators**

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of support for home educators:

- One parent noted that he has a very positive relationship with the Board.
- One parent pointed out that he has no relationship with the Board.
- A parent said that they registered with the Board, had one visit from a Board Officer, and were never visited again.
- It was noted that the Board makes no financial contribution to home education.
- It was generally accepted that the Board could do more to support home educators should they wish to avail of it, including more resources.
- It was suggested that parents would like to be able to access funds for exams – they stressed that they get no help to pay for exams even though this is paid for from the public purse.
- It was pointed out that allocation of support and resources would need to be fair in respect of equality issues.
- It was pointed out that home education is not expensive and therefore more efficient than state schooling.
- It was noted that this policy would be costly to implement.
- It was pointed out that no coherent networks are set up by the Board i.e. links to other home educating groups e.g. Christian groups or signposts to afterschool clubs, activities etc.

## **7. Monitoring of EHE Programmes**

The following points/concerns were raised in respect of monitoring of programmes:

- It was noted that the Board lacks expertise in the area of Home Education. The school environment is not comparable to home education and could not be assessed in the same way.
- Why should a Board officer, who doesn't even know the child, monitor a Programme of education – its none of the Board's business.
- Who will cover the cost of paying monitoring officers – there isn't enough money to even inspect schools.

## **8. Additional Points/Concerns**

The following additional points/concerns were raised:

- This is a very negative policy – the drafters haven't bothered to consult with parents prior to drawing up this draft. A new policy needs to be developed in conjunction with home educating parents.
- Are Boards afraid that home education will continue to grow and be more successful than state schooling?
- This draft is a knee jerk reaction.
- Assessment forms should have been included with the consultation documentation.
- There are people who are registered with the Board who didn't receive a letter about this consultation. It should have been advertised in the papers
- Education Otherwise were not consulted.

## **Conclusion**

Pat thanked everyone for attending, and sought confirmation that everyone felt they had an opportunity to present their views. It was agreed that Pat would share her draft notes of the Focus Group with consultees to facilitate clarification that views were recorded and expressed accurately and fairly.

Consultees thanked Pat for her facilitation of the Focus group.

**The Focus Group concluded at 4.20 pm.**