

# NSPCC Northern Ireland response to the consultation on Elective Home Education Policy

June 2014

## **Introduction**

1. NSPCC welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation and we are fully supportive that the welfare of the child must be the paramount consideration in relation to Elective Home Education. NSPCC are the lead child protection charity in Northern Ireland delivering a range of pioneering evidence based therapeutic and protection services directly to children and their families. We have statutory child protection powers under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and are core members of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (PPANI).
2. This response to the Elective Home Education Policy consultation has been informed by our specialist safeguarding and child protection professionals who interface with the education sector in local communities to protect children and young people from all forms of abuse. Our mission is to end cruelty to children, and to ensure that measures for safeguarding and child protection are sufficiently robust to provide the best outcomes for all children and young people and their families, irrespective of the education setting. We confine our comments to the area of safeguarding children who are home educated.

## **General comments**

3. The NSPCC recognises that although parents have a right to home educate their child in accordance with Article 44 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, it is vital that this guidance strikes the right balance between parental rights and sufficiently safeguarding children and the child's right to protection.
4. Whilst it would be incongruent and unjust to disproportionately distort the commitment and exemplary practice by most home educators who try to ensure that their children are safe, healthy and happy; there are significant safeguarding challenges that may exist around educating exclusively in a domestic or home environment. NSPCC therefore welcome the new guidance which places responsibilities on the five Education and Library Boards and parents to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

## **Specific comments**

5. NSPCC endorse the duties outlined in section 2(a) whereby the Education Welfare Officer or designated officer for child protection will be contacted on the same day that any concern is noted, to ensure that any safeguarding needs of the child are assessed in the first instance. We understand that parents choose to educate their child at home for a variety of reasons and that in some cases this has been because of a child's negative experience at school; therefore we would stress the importance of being aware and responsive to the individual needs of the child throughout this process.
6. Section 7(iii) of the document rightly recognises the voice of the child and in particular that *the child's opinion will also be taken into consideration* when monitoring the EHE programme. However, the guidance omits any clear interpretation or circumstance of this provision. We would recommend that the view of the child or young person is

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independently sought, if deemed appropriate or, if a child is particularly vulnerable or has particular communication needs, in the company of a trusted person who is not the home educator or a relative. As well as enabling assessment on the welfare of the child the named officer for EHE should be a source of support where the young person can get advice and information if necessary.<sup>1</sup>

7. It may be useful to note that NSPCC's ChildLine School's Service<sup>2</sup> delivers a prevention programme to all key stage 2 pupils in schools across Northern Ireland. This gives children and young people the knowledge, confidence and skills to identify all forms of abuse and provides them with the skills to protect themselves and enabling them to recognise where they can go for support should they need it. We are continually looking at ways to engage with all children who miss this opportunity in a school setting and there is potential for our team to deliver this service/provide materials to children and young people and their families who are educated at home.
8. Whilst the guidance affirms that the statutory commitments contained within Schedule 13 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 are satisfied, we are concerned that families with children who are home educated may only be visited by the Board/ESA's named officer once a year. In addition, the monitoring arrangements for elective home education programmes in section 7(iii) also only stipulate *at least* an annual visit. The reality is that those who may abuse their children can potentially decide to home educate as a mechanism to avoid detection and there will be some home schooled children who may be more vulnerable because of their circumstances. Therefore the monitoring requirements contained in the guidance should be strengthened to reduce the barriers to identifying and detecting abuse and harm.
9. Another important element of Elective Home Education is to ensure that parents are afforded sufficient support. The Board/ESA named officer should facilitate and provide resources available to ensure parents receive appropriate support to deliver the full integrated approach with wellbeing, protection and education duties to the fore.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During 2012-13 ChildLine bases across the UK carried out over 250 counselling sessions where young people mentioned a concern relating to being home educated. Of the total, 22% talked about low mood/self esteem, 16% talked about school/education problems and 13% mentioned family relationship issues.

<sup>2</sup> Further information available at: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/the-work-we-do/childline-services/childline-schools-service/childline-schools-service\\_wda90513.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/the-work-we-do/childline-services/childline-schools-service/childline-schools-service_wda90513.html)

<sup>3</sup> The NSPCC website provides advice and guidance for parents on a range of child safety issues available at: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents/for-parents-hub\\_wda96726.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents/for-parents-hub_wda96726.html)