

## **NSPCC Northern Ireland response to the Education Authority consultation on Guidelines for Elective Home Education**

### **Introduction**

The NSPCC Northern Ireland are grateful for the opportunity to respond to this consultation issued by the Education Authority. We understand that the proposed Elective Home Education (EHE) guidelines supersede the former Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards draft policy that was previously consulted on, and responded to by NSPCC, some five years ago. In welcoming the renewed focus on this standardised guidance, we ask that every effort is made to expedite the final guidance given the already notable delay.

The NSPCC supports parents' rights to educate a child in a way they see fit, and we recognise that, for some children, this is the right decision. We know that home education can take on many forms and there are multiple reasons for wanting to educate a child outside of mainstream settings, including for example, religious or cultural beliefs, different pedagogical approaches, tailored SEN teaching, because of bullying, or difficulties accessing appropriate schools.

We want to ensure that these guidelines do not impede those families who are successfully, and through choice, educating their children at home. Being home educated does not in itself pose any additional safeguarding risks to children, however, it is important that children are equipped with the same level of visibility, and support and additional assistance as those in mainstream education. Introducing a register of children home educated would avoid a child becoming lost in the system and would help the Education Authority to effectively provide supportive arrangements if required.

We are not providing a detailed response to the draft guidelines, instead our comments are confined to the safeguarding components of the guidance, and the considered register for children who are home educated.

### **Children's rights**

We are pleased that the draft guidelines have adopted a rights-based approach, and specifically references the right to an effective education, Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The paramount consideration for the NSPCC is the child's best interest, Article 3 of the UNCRC. We ask that this is reflected in the guidelines; and we strongly recommend that the 'best interests of the child' should be one of the key principles underpinning the guidance, and should therefore feature in section 1.3 of the draft guidelines.

### **Mandatory registration**

The NSPCC supports the implementation of a mandatory register for all children, educated outside of mainstream education. We believe that without registration, a child can remain unknown to the Education Authority, which reduces their visibility and the chances of them receiving professional support they may require. Introducing a register is a necessary first step in identifying children who are educated outside of school, and it provides an indicator of the needs of these children and their families. Having a greater awareness of the scale of elective home education will expectedly allow Education Authorities to allocate sufficient resources to support parents who are home educating.

There remains no legal obligation on parents to register their child as being home educated if they have never attended school, and therefore no effective way for the Education Authority to discharge its safeguarding responsibilities. This is a major concern for the NSPCC, we believe the Education Authority must be proactive in identifying all children who are educated at home and a register would be a solution to this identified gap.

### **Mandatory monitoring**

We support the introduction of mandatory monitoring of home education settings, which would allow Education Authorities to act on their duty to ensure that children within their area receive a suitable quality of education; and to ensure that families receive the right kind of support at the right time.

A good relationship between the Education Authority and parents is crucial for facilitating information sharing. Poor information sharing can often result in missed opportunities in providing support and may prevent the Education Authority from supporting, or intervening when necessary. This principle applies to all children, not just those in mainstream schooling. Monitoring should therefore strike an appropriate balance between being sufficiently robust to protect children while not being so intrusive as to invade excessively on the freedom of parents and families to choose what is best for their children.

### **Family support**

The guidelines helpfully detail family support resources/information for EHE families and a range of organisation who offer advice and assistance can be found in the Appendix 1 of the draft document. Our [NSPCC helpline service](#) may also be a useful resource for adults wanting help, advice and support. Additionally, the NSPCC is keen to support families in their role as educators and we are committed to working with them, potentially on a group basis going forward. We would welcome the opportunity to deliver our [Speak out Stay safe](#) programmes aimed at primary school aged children; also parents/carers can avail of our online safety workshops, in partnerships with o2 to learn more about keeping their family safe online.

**If you would like to discuss this response in further detail please contact Orla O'Hagan at [Orla.OHagan@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:Orla.OHagan@nspcc.org.uk)**