

Home Education and the Cost of Deregistration

by Fiona Nicholson

For the last 18 months I have been the Local Contact for Education Otherwise in Sheffield. My son has never been to school or nursery. Before I took up this work I mostly knew people whose situation was roughly comparable with my own, autonomous home educators whose children had never been in the system. At social events I occasionally came across a family where the child had been deregistered from school and I would listen uncomprehendingly to stories about bullying or SATS and I would sometimes hear about people's experience of the Sheffield Home Education Advisor, where I would be told about special educational projects the children were saving to show the Advisor or how they demonstrated "Fun Science" experiments on a home visit.

Then I took over as Local Contact and it was a window on another world. There were around 50 families and I only knew about a third of them personally. I then started to get phone calls and emails from new families and this is where I learned a little about what is happening in schools.

There appear to be two main groups of deregistering families. The first group were parents who felt that their

children had been pushed into fulltime formal education before they were ready. The second group were looking at alternatives to school following bullying incidents.

If the children were of secondary school age the families were invariably very worried about GCSEs and did not want their children to miss schooling through no fault of their own.

I discovered that for many parents of teenagers education equals schooling equals taking GCSEs. Parents were adamant that they were not able to teach their children at home either because they were in full time work or because they were not qualified teachers. They asked me how I managed as the parent of a teenager and when I explained that we were not doing GCSEs they were politely curious but clearly did not think it was relevant to them.

I conscientiously relayed information about correspondence courses like the NEC but time and time again I heard that what parents wanted was for their offspring either

- to be accommodated at the present school with more support and a better bullying policy implemented and the bullies excluded or expelled,

- to have a tutor paid for by the LA
- to take up a college place in order to study for GCSEs

or

- to secure a place at a particular school elsewhere in the city, usually one with a waiting list.

I remember a period when I had long conversations with a mother whose daughter had not attended school for months following an assault at the school.

This girl would have been starting her GCSEs at the beginning of the next school year. The family had been advised by a solicitor that they needed to keep the daughter on the school roll in order to take legal action against the head teacher. The Hospital and Home Education Service were also promising a few hours of one to one tutoring funded by the LA. The money for this came from the per capita funding which is received by the schools for each registered pupil. In this case the school simply wanted the problem to go away. They actively pushed the family to deregister and told them they would be better off making a fresh start at a new school. The head teacher reluctantly agreed to an interim funds transfer to pay for a few hours of tutoring but absolutely refused to sign any authorisation for school money to be permanently

transferred to the local FE college which was happy to accept the girl under 14-16 arrangements already in place subject to funding from the LA.

In the end this situation was resolved when the LA sidestepped the school when their own Access and Inclusion Department recommended funding.

However the Local Authority at present only has funding for 40 places for young people in Sheffield who are not on a school roll and the LA is obliged to allocate most of this to young people who move into the area and find that schools refuse to take on new pupils during the GCSE years.

I have been told by the Extended Curriculum Development Team at the Children and Young People's Directorate that the LA has no power over school decisions and that schools are watching their backs with respect to League Tables for exam results.

What happens with council funding for education in Sheffield and elsewhere is that the DfES requires every maintained school to complete a PLASC return¹ (Pupil Level Annual School Census) once a year. As Sheffield LA explains to head teachers, "The calculation of Dedicated Schools Grant, and thus your school's budget, is now wholly based on the actual pupils in school on the January census date."²

I was also investigating how Sheffield Council was responding to the Government's Every Child Matters initiative. I discovered that the council had run city-wide focus groups among 5,000 school children and that they were now looking to extend the scope to hard-to-reach groups outside the school system. I attended a Focus Group briefing meeting and set up our own Focus Group with local home educators.

Under Every Child Matters the council has a duty to consult children about things which affect them locally in order to determine the children and young people's own wishes and priorities.

Completely by chance at this meeting I came across the person in charge of Sheffield's Hospital and Home Education Service who told me that he ran a council-funded centre for children and young people who for whatever reason were unable to attend school. He said that it was registered as a local examinations centre and also supplied tutors who were funded by the Local Authority. He told me that they did not only help children in hospital but that they also had someone who worked specifically with what he called "anxious and withdrawn" children and young people. He directed me to the Sheffield City Council website³ "The Service provides a purchased

service for pupils who are unable to attend school for reasons connected with mental health. We seek to support those schools which decide to purchase tuition and provide advice to those which make other arrangements."

The significant thing here is the use of the word "purchase". This is where I learned in some detail about the per capita funding, approximately £5,000 for each school child.

The Hospital Education man told me that the Standhouse Centre bills the LA at £35 an hour for a tutor and for this reason the child or young person is required to be on a school roll in order that the school may purchase services. There is no "Education Budget" which pays for this and it remains at the discretion of the head teacher of the school concerned. I asked what happened if a school did not choose to co-operate and he told me of a case where this had indeed happened and that the boy concerned was part way through GCSEs and that the Standhouse Centre managed to find another school which would accept the boy on the roll in order for the Centre's services to be purchased via the transfer of the school's per capita funding.

A short time after I had digested this I had a call from someone who had heard of me through the work I had done with a friend. This mother was

immensely distressed as she told me that her daughter was being kept out of school following a recent assault which was the culmination of bullying incidents at school but took place just off school premises a few minutes after school finished in the afternoon.

It was also filmed on the attackers' mobile phones. The mother told me that the school refused to take action against the pupils who had assaulted her daughter and were insistent that the girl should return to school. When the mother informed the school that it was not safe for her daughter to return various members of the school staff became very impatient and said that in that case the girl should just leave the school.

Before the mother spoke to me she had telephoned the school and the school secretary had given her the impression that the girl's name had already been removed from the school roll. The mother was phoning me to find out whether the school could do this. She was also very upset and confused because she still had a meeting arranged with the head teacher for the end of the week.

What the family wanted was for the pupils who had attacked the girl to be excluded. They also wanted a full investigation of the incident and of other bullying episodes at the school. They had learned from a family

friend in a similar position that, as the mother put it, the school money could be used to pay for a tutor and I was able to confirm this.

In the long term the family wanted the daughter to attend an over-subscribed school elsewhere in the city, but since they foresaw that this might be problematic they were insistent that an LA tutor be provided in the interim and the only way this could happen was if the girl remained on the school roll for the service to be purchased, since the family could not possibly pay the £35 an hour themselves.

The mother authorised me to make telephone enquiries on her behalf.

I asked Access and Inclusion if the Elective Home Education Advisor had been informed of a newly deregistered young person. I was told no, she hadn't but that this didn't necessarily mean anything because it could take a few weeks for the information to percolate through the system and in any event the council computers had been down for most of the day.

So I then asked if the Secondary Admissions Team might be able to check if the girl was still a registered pupil and was told yes they could do that but that this wasn't up to date and that the name could recently

have been removed on the school premises before the LA was notified.

I had a reasonable telephone acquaintance by now with the Access and Inclusion people and the person I spoke to said that the LA would be very concerned if the school were indeed seeking to rid itself of a pupil or family who had become an inconvenience. He said he was sure it was a mistake or a misunderstanding and did I think that the family might appreciate an Education Welfare Officer [EWO] from the LA having a chat with the mother to ascertain the family's wishes and then perhaps also attending the forthcoming meeting scheduled with the head teacher. I told him that I would relay his message to the mother and ask her to get in touch with the department.

Over the next few days I took a series of phone calls from the LA and the family. The school apparently told the mother that the girl would "lose her place" at the school if she did not return immediately. The school also told the family that school was the best place and that the girl would not receive an education if she left school and that she would not be able to take exams.

The family was further informed that no one who left school ever took any exams, that the mother was not qualified to teach her daughter and that the school could not ask teachers

to work beyond their contracted hours to set work or mark it while the girl was not attending and that the mother should understand that she was ruining her daughter's chances of any future employment or success in life and that she should think "very seriously" about the consequences of what she was doing.

I also had other parents tell me that they heard similar things from head teachers and class teachers when they tried to broach the subject of home education or of any alternatives to full time attendance at the school.

In the end the EWO from the LA was unable to attend the meeting itself but she did go and visit the family and offer support and information about the Hospital and Home Education Service and said on the family's behalf and in accordance with the family's express wishes, the LA would oppose any attempt by the school to deregister the girl.

In addition to this the mother became very anxious about the meeting with the school because she simply had no idea what to expect and I was able to tell her what I had learned about these kinds of meetings from my own experience as EO Local Contact in Sheffield and internet home education message group. I referred the family to the legal pages of both the EO website:

www.education-otherwise.org/SiteMap.htm

and Mike's HE-UK website and FAQ:

www.home-education.org.uk/faq.htm

www.home-education.org.uk/legal.htm

I advised the mother that the school would probably backtrack at the meeting and say that they took bullying very seriously and that if the girl would only now come back into school they were sure they could all work together to sort things out. I said to the mother that she should make a decision in advance about how she would react to any such proposal because otherwise she might be thrown off balance by the school suddenly being sympathetic.

In the end the meeting with the school went quite well and the mother was very relieved. The school did indeed offer special extra help with bullying incidents but also continued to insist that it was unable to exclude other pupils.

The head teacher confirmed that after speaking to the LA he would of course look favourably on a short term funds transfer to purchase

tutoring services because the school's only concern was that the girl did not miss any education. The mother updated me with the news that the LA was supporting the family's admission to a new school.

The mother said to me that before all this came up she had no idea that school wasn't compulsory or that home education could be very good for children and young people.

Personally I would say that deregistration is a complex issue and that in a minority of cases a successful outcome for the family concerned is that the child or young person remains on the school roll and that this only becomes evident when we follow the money trail.

1 www.sda-ltd.com/plasc-2006-schools.php

2 66.102.9.104/search?q=cache:brArVVbTeI4J:www.sheffield.gov.uk/EasySite/lib/serveDocument.asp%3Fdoc%3D88047%26pgid%3D103442+PLASC+per+capita+funding&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=11

3 www.sheffield.gov.uk/education/services-to-schools/hospital-and-home-education-service/anxious-or-withdrawn-non-attenders

Pupils want more say in how schools are run

In a citizenship survey conducted by OFSTED children and teachers were asked "Do you think that pupils should or should not have more of a say in the way that schools are run?" A staggering 88% of pupils agreed while only a disappointing 41% of teachers agreed. In another question 62% of teachers were "unconcerned" at having to teach "controversial" political issues.

www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2005/Ofsted%20-%20teachers&kids/ofsted-citizenship-dec-04.asp

