

Support for Home-Educating Families from Milton Keynes Local Authority

by Mary Mullett, Home Education Contact

Introduction

An invitation to write an article came as a pleasant surprise. I am part of a team in Milton Keynes Local Authority (LA) who work as Home Education Contacts (HEC) to support families who have chosen to educate their children at home. We subscribe to this publication and enjoy reading it but sometimes an article gives a sad account of unsatisfactory relations between the HE families and their LA.

As we enjoy a positive situation here, (though we are not complacent), perhaps our experience can be of interest to other readers.

Preparation and Communication

The scheme was launched in February 2005. I believe two aspects, preparation and communication, have been the key factors in creating the success of our scheme. Preparation, because the different parties to the project were able to understand each others' positions and concerns and get to know each other as people. Then the communication was clear and on a human level. After all we share an abiding interest in the children's wellbeing and a belief in the parents' right to make their choice over educational provision.

As a relatively new unitary authority Milton Keynes was in a unique position to look afresh at the law and develop its own approach. Work began some years prior to the launch but there was a hiccup when the LA initially produced ideas not entirely welcomed by local home educating families. Graham Matthews from the LA's School Improvement Division, subsequently joined by Shelagh Bainbridge, (Head of Fenny House, where the HEC service is based) worked collaboratively with a number of home educators from the Home Education Network (MKHen). This combined group were prepared to discuss issues, examine practice and take the group forward. They produced the MK LA policy on elective home education.

From 2004 onwards Shelagh and three HEC people, Eve Cheshire, Barbara Middleton and myself, Mary Mullett, worked further with MKHen at twice-termly meetings. These were fairly informal occasions, at times quite light-hearted. We established good rapport and an encouraging level of trust and co-operation.

Additional documents

At these meetings further issues and concerns raised by home educating families in MK were listened to carefully. Valued information sheets have been created regarding:

- a) Questions frequently asked by parents and children considering Home Ed.
- b) The role of the "Contact" persons at Fenny House

These documents are available from the LA, Fenny House, local libraries and are also on the MKHen website.

Delivering the service

1. The Drop-in

It was agreed by all that a "drop-in" facility which HE families could access as they wished would be helpful. So when the service began in February 2005, it was announced on the MKHen website. Each Monday afternoon during term time, the Home Education Contacts provide drop-in facilities

for home educating families to come and talk over any issues they have regarding the home education process or to receive a sympathetic ear or some encouragement.

Much thought was given by the Contacts about where and how these sessions would work. When meeting families a holistic approach has been shared from the outset, hearing from the parents the needs of the whole child and listening carefully to the particular issues the parents and children wish to discuss. If the child is young and the parents prefer, the child uses our HEC selection of play resources (paint, clay, puzzles, games and drawing materials), so the child can play how he/she wishes. The materials usually go down well. Otherwise the young person is of course included and takes part in the discussion.

The child's self-esteem may be fragile if withdrawal from school was partly because of bullying. The parents sometimes are still angry that the matter was not resolved within school and are also relieved that their child is becoming more relaxed at home. We do offer contact details of appropriate local counselling agencies. If and when the child is ready, they may use the counselling to reflect on the issues and develop strategies and assertiveness to manage any bullying if it reoccurs in other settings in the future.

We also explore what physical activities are available to the child to support a healthy life style. We explain there is on the MKCouncil website a regularly updated list of a wide range of out of school activities for children and young people. We also offer a pack from the School Nurse Service (Immunisation link) regarding primary and teenage immunisation, together with contact numbers. It is very helpful to us to have these information packs to pass on to families and we really appreciate the thought that has produced them.

Sometimes parents approach the Home Education Contacts feeling overwhelmed with the idea of trying to deliver the National Curriculum at home. So they are reassured that this is not a legal requirement and look at what they may wish to provide in future. IT and the Internet is a valuable resource, and many families have computers at home. If not, they can access them at local libraries. A list of useful websites is made available. MKHen have also provided us with details of websites they use.

The children understand from us that they are entitled to a careers interview and access to college courses.

As young people approach college age parents begin to think about formal exams and college prospects. Fenny House is an exam centre for AQA and OCR exams and, by arrangement, Home Educated students may sit exams here. Most schools do not cater for external candidates. We have produced a checklist of the timescale for registering and sitting GCSEs via Fenny House.

At the appropriate stage, if requested, Home Education Contacts can outline procedures for college application and suggest children keep examples of their work, building up a portfolio, (including photos), of work, outings and activities. This will be helpful evidence to a college when considering an application from a student who may not have exam results.

Suggestions are made regarding ways of finding universities who will consider students without the conventional academic background.

We have designed record forms for these meetings with duplicates backing them, which we all discuss and fill in together at the end of the meeting. All present sign them and the families take the top copy home as a record of their visit. So they have notes of ideas plus thoughts for action and any future contact details agreed.

2. Home Education Ideas Fayre

After the launch in February 05 a meeting was held with MKHen families before Christmas 05 to review progress. It was most encouraging to hear that feedback to MKHen from families who had visited the drop-in facility on Mondays had been positive. Many families new to home educating said they had derived considerable benefit, not to mention a feeling of relief, from their meetings with the Home Education Contacts.

Shelagh came up with the idea of a Fayre as an opportunity to share successful projects children had worked on. It was planned for the afternoon of Monday 6th March 2006. The hall at Fenny House could be used to host the Ideas Fayre. Invitations were sent to all families on our 'list' and MKHen publicised it on their website.

Regular MKHen parents and children brought in samples of children's work; two Fenny House staff showed examples of maths equipment and working with the Arts and photography. Other displays included books about Home Education, information about websites and a range of story and information books. There were LEA leaflets re inoculations, careers, etc and a display about the work of the local MK Parks Trust. Refreshments were provided and the opportunity to chat and relax was very much encouraged.

The younger children played happily in the area prepared for them and also looked around the hall with their parents. Teenagers sat together and enjoyed some chats.

Due to the success of the first Fayre, a second one was held in October 2006 and a further one will be held in 2008. The Fayres have helped to build further trust between the LA and home educating families and they have introduced us to some families whose children have never been registered in the state education system. We respect the right to privacy of these families.

3. Communication and outreach

When a family withdraws their child from school to home educate they receive a letter from the LA introducing our service and saying we will be in touch to see how things are going after a few weeks of "settling down". We do have concerns when we write to Home Ed families and do not hear back from them. So we have developed some follow-up letters with suggestions for how the families may wish to communicate with us. We looked at the good practice in other authorities and added some ideas of our own. The family may choose to visit us, to write to us or talk on the phone, or invite us to visit them at home or meet somewhere mutually acceptable.

Response has been very encouraging.

A diary is kept in the Fenny House office to note telephone messages which arrive throughout the week and appointments are set up for the drop-in facility.

Outreach

Eve and I began to visit home educating families to learn and understand how the diversity of approaches to home educating enriches the children's lives. In this respect we greatly value the support of MKHen. When approached, one member of the group was willing to act as a guinea pig, for us to visit her and her children and to help evaluate our visiting technique!

Background to our work

I was specifically asked by the editor to explain something of our philosophy and approach to this work, and I hope it has been implicit and recognized by families as they come and meet us. So I trust what I am about to say will not come as a surprise to any MK Home Ed families reading this!

It is a delicate matter because each HE family is unique and has of course freedom under the law to follow their own approach to the appropriate and effective full-time education of their

child/dren. As employees we work within the LA context and need to be responsible and answerable for our methods and approach to the LA, as well as to the families we work with.

We respect the Home Educating community and are learning all the time about the varied creative ways they work with their children.

There is a DCSF initiative called “**Every Child Matters**”, which has five “signposts”, headings for reflection in work with and for children. This underpins the work of LAs throughout England and Wales. We have tried to consider each signpost from the Home Ed perspective.

The signposts are: Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution, Community Life, Achieve Economic Well-being.

So we keep these headings in mind as we work with families and have tried to be creative with them, producing the developments outlined below.

Innovative developments

1. GCSE Exam Entries

Fenny House acts as an examination centre for home educating parents. This is the third year of providing this facility. Exam regulations require some student information to be lodged and the Head of Fenny House has worked with the home educating group to produce a suitable method of meeting this requirement. Together the group looked at designing a student information card. This card is now used by all external/private exam candidates.

So far students have been entered for English, Maths, Science, Geography and Art and Design examinations. The excellent examination results are a testimony to the hard work and effort on the part of all candidates and their families.

Perhaps the most successful subject to date has been GCSE Art and Design. This grew out of a joint effort between the Milton Keynes Home Educators group, a local Art teacher and the Head of Fenny House. The Art teacher taught GCSE Art and Design to a group of Home Educated students and Fenny House provided the exam venue and liaised with both the examination board and the Art teacher. A GCSE Art and Design Exhibition was held at Fenny House. The exam moderator was very impressed by the quality of the work and also the age range of the students involved. The exam results were outstanding.

2. Consultation on the government guidelines re Home Education

End of term in July 07 was effectively the deadline for us to respond to the government consultation on its guidelines on Home Education. We held two meetings with our MKHen friends to discuss our different perspectives on the consultation document and understand how and why our responses might be different. But we decided, uniquely in the country perhaps, to offer a **joint response** in addition to our separate LA and Hen responses. Time constraints meant we could not cover every aspect but we were pleased to have large areas of agreement to pass on to government.

Forging Ahead

All joint HEC and MKHen meetings are now held at Fenny House and visiting speakers are often invited as the need arises. So far the group have been introduced to the work of the Countec Work Experience Providers and in May 2007 there was a meeting with the Educational Welfare Service to look at the impact of truancy sweeps on home educators. In September 2007 a very positive meeting with the community police officer involved with organizing the truancy sweeps was held. Parents were able to express concerns and each side could understand the issues of the other.

Liaison between the police, Fenny House and MKHen will continue, so that Home Ed students will be confident of supportive treatment from the police if they are caught up in a sweep.

The LA has agreed to fund the Criminal Records Check search fees for qualified teachers planning to work as tutors to Home Ed children as individuals or in groups.

A wider context:

Georgeanne Scott is a leading member of the MKHen group and has been involved with the LA from the beginning. She spoke at the National Home Education Monitors Conference in Harlow in May 2006 and praised the work that we have been doing. As a result there was interest in the approach of MKLA and its Home Ed policies and Shelagh Bainbridge has received telephone calls from different parts of the country requesting help with home education issues.

The future

We have lots of ideas to improve and build on the service we offer. There is a real desire on our part to work with and understand home education and we are privileged to be in contact with such committed parents and children. The future is very exciting.

Note

I must emphasise that this article represents my own personal thoughts and approach. I would like to thank in particular from the LA Graham, Shelagh and Eve, and Barbara for her early work; from MKHen Georgeanne Scott and Neil Taylor-Moore from for their help and support. All the local Hen members have helped and contributed to our work in different ways. The large numbers of home educating families who have written to us, phoned in or visited the drop-in have helped develop our understanding of this important and growing aspect of education in our country today.