

## **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**2 October 2025**

### **Elective Home Education – Focus Group**

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#### **Summary**

Medway has a growing number of parents and carers choosing to electively home educate their children. The number is proportionally high when compared to the national average.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill proposes changes for local authorities and families in relation to EHE. The council is keen to understand in more detail the drivers behind the decision to EHE, so that they can provide the best support for families when implementing the proposed changes.

This report summarises the findings and the key themes emerging from the Elective Home Education (EHE) focus group activity during the summer term 2025. The key themes in order of priority are identified as:

- Mental health and SEND support in schools is often inadequate.
- Loss of trust in the education system.
- Cultural/religious values not respected.
- COVID-19 legacy has normalised remote learning.
- Flexibility and autonomy are key attractions.

#### **1. Recommendation**

- 1.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the findings of the research report.

#### **2. Budget and policy framework**

- 2.1 Elective Home Education is a statutory duty under Section 7 of the Education Act 1996, which places responsibility on parents to ensure their child receives a suitable education. The Council has a duty to ensure that children who are

educated at home are receiving an appropriate education and to safeguard their welfare.

- 2.2 This decision supports the Council Plan's priorities around ensuring all children and young people have access to high-quality education and promoting inclusion and safeguarding. The associated activities, including monitoring, support, and engagement with families, are funded within the existing budget allocation for Education and SEND services.

### 3. Background

- 3.1 EHE is the term used to describe a choice by parents and carers to provide education for their children at home instead of sending them to school full-time. EHE is different to Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) - for example, tuition for children who are too ill to attend school. EHE is different to Children Missing Education (CME) which refers to children that are not registered at a school, for reasons other than parental preference.
- 3.2 An increasing number of parents and carers are choosing to EHE their children, with a high proportion exercising their right to not to share the reason for their decision with the local authority. The growth started post-pandemic and has continued into the current year. The number of EHE children remains higher than pre-pandemic levels.
- 3.3 Nationally, it is recognised that the impact of home education on children's outcomes can vary widely depending on the quality of the educational plan, the level of social interaction, and the support provided by parents and carers and local authorities.

### 4. Data

- 4.1 There are currently 1270 children on the EHE register (June 2025)

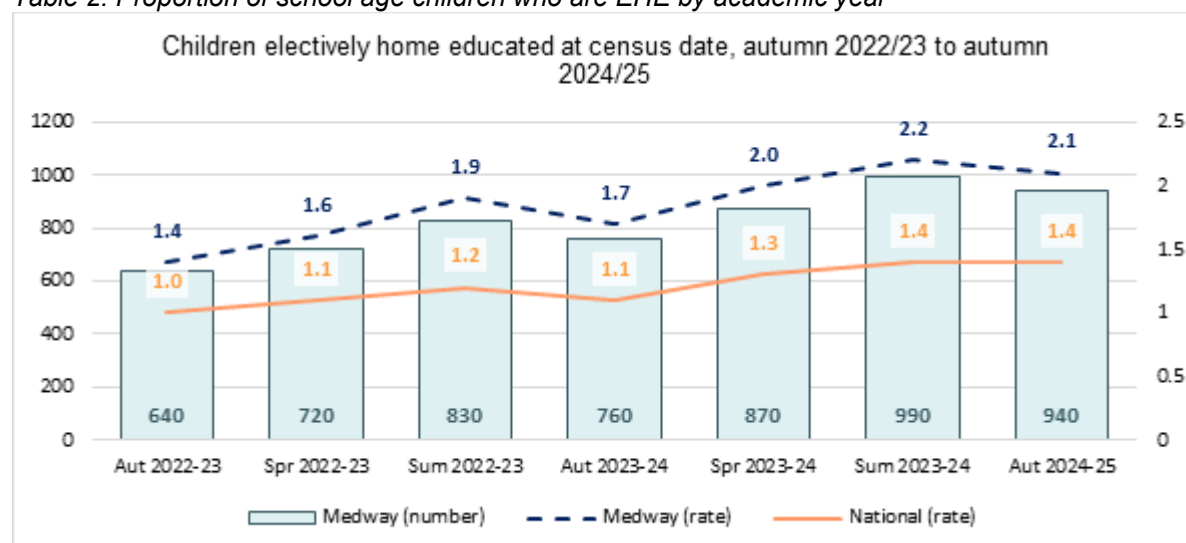
*Table 1: Number of EHE by academic year*

Year	Parameter	Primary	Secondary	Nc Yr 12+	Unknown	Grand Total
<b>Pre Pandemic</b>	01/03/2019 - 29/02/2020	28	174	475	4	681
<b>2020/21</b>	01/03/2020 - 28/02/2021	86	218	388	3	695
<b>2021/22</b>	01/03/2021 - 28/02/2022	149	327	425	3	904
<b>2022/23</b>	01/03/2022 - 28/02/2023	167	450	468	1	1086
<b>2023/24</b>	01/03/2023 - 29/02/2024	309	675	409		1393
<b>2024/25</b>	01/03/2024 - 28/02/2025	401	912	207		1520
<b>Ac Yr 2024/25</b>	01/09/2024 - 14/02/2025	360	845			1205
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>1500</b>	<b>3601</b>	<b>2372</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7484</b>

*This data is for children of compulsory school age who are resident in the Medway and the local authority are aware (have been formally notified) of them being electively home educated.*

- 4.2 2.1% of statutory school age children in Medway were EHE in the academic year 2024/25 which was 0.7pp higher than the national EHE rate in autumn 2024. (based on ONS mid-year population estimates)

Table 2: Proportion of school age children who are EHE by academic year



- 4.3 The proportion of children EHE in Medway is the highest when compared to its ten statistical neighbours and is the 3rd highest local authority nationally.

Table 3: Reasons given by parents/carers for registering their child as EHE in autumn 2024/25

Reason for School Exclusion	Medway %	National %
Physical health	0%	2%
Mental health	11%	14%
Health COVID	0%	1%
Did not get school preference	2%	2%
Permanent exclusion	0%	0%
Risk of school exclusion	0%	1%
Difficulty accessing suitable school place	0%	1%
Philosophical	15%	14%
Religious	0%	1%
Lifestyle	0%	9%
School suggestion	0%	0%
School dissatisfaction general	8%	7%
School dissatisfaction SEND	7%	3%
School dissatisfaction bullying	6%	3%
No reason given	33%	12%
Other	0%	11%
Unknown	0%	19%

Note: 0% - denotes figures based on count that rounds to low but is not 0. Figures may not sum to breakdowns due to rounding.

## 5. Focus group

- 5.1 A focus group consisting of senior officers, a representative councillor from each political group and 1 co-opted member from Medway Parents and Carers Forum, carried out activities to better understand the reasons why an increasing number of parents and carers are choosing to home educate.
- All parents and carers on the councils register for EHE were sent an online survey. (appendix A).
  - Parents and carers were invited to attend forums with councillors to discuss their decision to EHE.
- 5.2 It should be noted that whilst all were contacted with the information held, the local authority does not hold up to date contact information for all parents and carers who have chosen to EHE.
- 5.3 The feedback highlighted the diverse motivations behind EHE and the systemic challenges families face. It highlighted the urgent need for a review of the education system and support for children and their families. The focus group identified 7 themes which reflect the recurring concerns and aspirations of families. These themes offer a foundation for a more inclusive, flexible, and supportive education strategy to be designed. Each theme has been broken down into Key Issues, Implications and Recommendations. Quotes are taken directly from the parents and carers.

## 6. Themes

### 6.1 **Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing**

Many families reported that school environments contributed to anxiety, trauma, and emotional distress. Children were overwhelmed, and parents felt schools lacked the capacity or sensitivity to respond effectively.

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*“My child found the school environment frightening.”*  
*“School anxiety was constant—he couldn’t cope.”*  
*“There was no emotional support, just punishment.”*

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#### Key Issues:

- Lack of support in school for children with anxiety and trauma.
- Lack of mental health understanding and support within schools.
- School refusal due to emotional overwhelm.

#### Implications:

- Unaddressed mental health needs can lead to long-term disengagement.
- Broken relationships between schools and families, preventing successful reintegration.

#### Recommendations:

- Expand school-based mental health services.
- Continue to roll out training and embed trauma-informed approaches.

- Develop further early identification and intervention expertise within schools.
- Work to further develop a resilience curriculum.

## 6.2 **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**

Families described long delays in accessing assessments and EHCPs, inconsistent support across schools, and a lack of specialist staff. Many felt their children were left to cope alone.

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*“SEND needs were ignored, and my child was left struggling.”*

*“We waited years for an EHCP—nothing changed.”*

*“The school didn’t understand autism at all.”*

*“The SEND lady herself was amazing, did everything she could. The teachers did not follow what was put in place for my child”*

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### Key Issues:

- Inadequate or inconsistent SEND provision.
- Long waits for EHCPs.
- EHCPs seen as the only way to receive additional support.
- Lack of specialist staff and tailored support.

### Implications:

- Inconsistent SEND provision drives families out of the system.
- Delays in support exacerbate educational and emotional challenges.

### Recommendations:

- Invest in more specialist staff and training.
- Ensure consistent SEND knowledge and standards across schools.
- Improve EHCP timeliness and quality.

## 6.3 **Loss of Trust in the School System**

Parents and carers cited rigid curriculums, staff turnover, and poor communication. Some felt schools were unwelcoming or dismissive of their concerns, especially when children were distressed. Some felt that the school didn’t want their child to attend.

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*“We lost confidence in the system—it felt like a postcode lottery.”*

*“They didn’t listen when my child was struggling.”*

*“Schools don’t treat parents as partners.”*

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### Key Issues:

- Perceived lack of respect for parental role.
- Inconsistent teaching and leadership.
- Poor handling of distressed children.

Implications:

- Trust breakdowns hinder reintegration and collaboration.
- Perceived inequities fuel disengagement.

Recommendations:

- Promote transparent, collaborative reintegration plans.
- Celebrate and communicate what schools offer.
- Build respectful partnerships with families

#### 6.4 **Bullying and School Refusal**

Bullying and peer conflict were common triggers for removal from school. Some children refused school due to trauma, and a few parents described distressing incidents of physical handling.

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*“School refusal became a daily battle.”*

*“He was physically handled when resisting entry—this broke our trust.”*

*“Bullying was ignored, and my child shut down.”*

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Key Issues:

- Unresolved bullying incidents.
- School refusal linked to emotional needs.
- Physical handling of distressed children.

Implications:

- Poor safeguarding responses deepen trauma.
- School refusal is often misunderstood and mishandled.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen anti-bullying policies and accountability.
- Use restorative and relational approaches.
- Provide specialist support for emotionally based school avoidance.

#### 6.5 **Cultural, Religious, and Philosophical Values**

Some families chose home education to align learning with their cultural or religious values, which they felt were not respected or reflected in mainstream schools.

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*“We wanted education that reflects our faith and values.”*

*“School didn’t understand our cultural background.”*

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Key Issues:

- Lack of cultural responsiveness in schools.
- Desire for faith-aligned education.
- Philosophical preference for alternative learning.

Implications:

- Lack of cultural awareness can alienate families.
- Cultural disconnects reduce engagement and trust.

Recommendations:

- Embed cultural competence in school leadership and curriculum.
- Offer flexible pathways that respect diverse values

## 6.6 COVID-19 Legacy and Remote Learning

The pandemic introduced families to remote learning, and many found it more effective or less stressful. Some continued with home education because it better suited their child's needs.

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*“Remote learning during COVID worked better for our child.”  
“We saw him thrive at home—why go back?”*

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Key Issues:

- More positive experiences with remote learning.
- Reduced stress and improved engagement at home.
- Continuation of pandemic-era learning models.

Implications:

- Remote learning has reshaped expectations.
- Hybrid models may offer viable alternatives.

Recommendations:

- Explore flexible and blended learning options.
- Support digital inclusion and access to online provision

## 6.7 Flexibility and Autonomy

Home education allows families to tailor learning to their child's pace, interests, and needs. This flexibility is especially valued by parents of gifted children or those who struggle with traditional structures.

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*“Home education lets us teach in a way that suits our child.”  
“He learns better through projects and hands-on work.”*

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Key Issues:

- Customised learning approaches.
- Freedom to explore creative or vocational pathways.
- Interest in online college options from age 14.

Implications:

- Rigid structures can exclude diverse learners.
- Autonomy fosters engagement and creativity.

Recommendations:

- Offer more flexible curriculum options and timetables
- Develop creative and vocational pathways.

- Pilot alternative learning options.

## 7. Support for EHE

- 7.1 Parents were also asked to give their views on their experience of EHE and what, if any support could be provided. The responses largely reflected financial barriers to exams and limited engagement from outside services.

### 7.2 Financial Barriers to Exams

Accessing formal qualifications is costly. Parents reported fees of up to £500 per GCSE and £1,500 per A-level, with limited affordable exam centres locally.

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*“GCSEs cost up to £500 per subject—we can’t afford that.”*  
*“We had to travel to Rye for a reasonably priced exam centre.”*  
*“The XXX School charges £18 plus exam fees—but spaces are limited.”*

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#### Key Issues:

- Limited local exam centres.
- High costs of exams.
- Travel burdens and restricted availability.

#### Implications:

- Financial barriers limit future opportunities.
- Lack of access undermines equity.

#### Recommendations:

- Expand affordable local exam centres.
- Provide clear guidance on qualification routes.

### 7.3 Limited Engagement from the Local Authority

Many families reported minimal contact with the Local Authority over years of home education. Some felt unsupported and uninformed about resources or reintegration options.

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*“We had only three contacts in 11 years—one was too late.”*  
*“No one ever checked in or offered help.”*

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#### Key Issues:

- Sparse communication from the LA.
- Lack of proactive support or outreach.
- Missed opportunities to guide families.

#### Implications:

- Safeguarding concerns may not be picked up.
- Missed opportunities to support and guide families.
- Lack of visibility undermines trust and reintegration.



Recommendations:

- Establish regular, supportive contact with EHE families.
- Create safe forums for dialogue and peer support.
- Improve outreach and information-sharing.

## 8. Risk

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Lack of oversight	Children educated at home may not receive a suitable education, impacting long-term outcomes.	Strengthen monitoring procedures, ensure timely follow-up visits, and provide guidance to families.	BII
Safeguarding concerns	Potential for children to be out of sight of professionals, increasing safeguarding risks.	Maintain robust referral pathways, multi-agency collaboration, and regular contact with families.	BII
Resource constraints	Increased demand for EHE may stretch existing staffing and resources.	Review staffing levels and consider resource reallocation or additional funding bids.	BII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

## 9. Financial implications

- 9.1 Schools receive a SEND Notional budget to provide for the additional SEND needs of children. Schools are required to spend up to £6000 above the core pupil funding for each child with SEND needs before requesting further funding from the Local Authority. The amount a school receives depends on the number of children, their prior attainment and a deprivation calculation. This funding isn't ringfenced and schools report this as being insufficient. The element 2 value of £6000 hasn't changed since it was introduced in 2013, therefore annually increasing the number of children who will meet this threshold due to the rising cost of provision.
- 9.2 Schools receive a separate grant to improve the attainment of pupils from deprived backgrounds based on pupils eligible for a free school meal, children in care and children with a parent in the armed forces.
- 9.3 The High Needs funding, which is part of the Dedicated School Grant, is managed by the Local Authority and funds the additional SEND support over and above the SEND Notional budget, for those children with an EHCP. This

is currently in deficit. A High Needs Budget Recovery Plan (the Safety Valve Plan) is in place to control the spend and remove the deficit.

- 9.4 The High needs budget cannot be spent on staffing. Any additional staff costs in the council would need to be covered by the general fund. The general fund currently covers the cost of 1 member of staff assigned to EHE.

## 10. Legal implications

- 10.1 Parents have a right to educate their children at home. Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 provides that:

"The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable - (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise."

- 10.2 This means that the responsibility for children's education rests with their parents. In England, education is compulsory, but – despite the phrase 'child of compulsory school age' quoted above – going to school is not.
- 10.3 State-funded education is made available for all children of compulsory school age whose parents request it, and every child should be in school or receiving alternative provision made by the local authority or the child's school, unless parents themselves can make suitable arrangements. If parents do educate children at home, section 7 means that the child should be getting an efficient, suitable full time education.
- 10.4 The current legal framework is not a system for regulating home education or forcing parents to educate their children in any particular way. Instead, it is a system for identifying and dealing with children who, for any reason and in any circumstances, are not receiving an efficient, suitable full-time education. If a child is not attending school fulltime, the law does not assume that child is not being suitably educated. It does require the local authority to enquire what education is being provided. Local authorities have these responsibilities for all children of compulsory school age. Depending on the results of their enquiries, the law may require further action by the local authority, for example a school attendance order.
- Local authorities have the same safeguarding responsibilities for children educated at home as for other children. They can use safeguarding powers appropriately, when warranted. This flows from the general responsibilities which local authorities have for the well-being of all children living in their area. Because of this, the department recommends that each local authority should, as a minimum:
  - have a written policy statement on elective home education which is clear, transparent and easily accessible by using different formats as necessary, which is reviewed regularly it reflects current law and local circumstances.
  - set aside the resources necessary to implement its policy effectively and consistently.

- consider their organisational structures for dealing with home education and the related areas mentioned above. Although parents who educate their children at home sometimes say that home education should be dealt with in isolation, the reality is that it needs a holistic approach to issues of suitability, attendance, welfare and safeguarding.
- seek to offer guidance to all known home-educating families in their area about their rights and obligations, and provide advice on good practice and available resources for parents who request it
- make it clear in all documentation that the local authority sees its role in relation to home education as part of its wider responsibilities, including safeguarding, for all children living in its area

10.5 The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, currently going through the House of Lords, aims to enhance child protection, improve educational standards, and support children's welfare through various reforms in social care and education. In relation to EHE the bill proposes:

- Registers that are mandatory for Children Not in School in each local authority area in England. Aiming to ensure that all children receive a suitable education and are safeguarded.
- An emphasis on the importance of safeguarding children who are educated at home. Local authorities will have the power to intervene if they have concerns about a child's education or safety.
- Additional funding for local authorities to support the implementation of the registration system and oversight of home-educated children. This funding is intended to cover administrative costs, training, and resources needed to effectively monitor and support home education.
- Local authorities will receive support to build capacity for managing the new responsibilities. This includes hiring additional staff, providing training for existing staff, and developing systems to track and support home-educated children.

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## Appendices

Appendix 1 – Survey results

Appendix 2 – Table of recommendations

## Background papers

None