

In common with many home educators, we looked for an exam venue first and at which exam boards they could accommodate before choosing subjects and specifications.

For the first year, we were on our own. We found a local independent school who were happy to let our children sit as external candidates, but the charges for invigilation and administration were very high which severely limited the amount of exams we could afford.

We stuck to the basics - English and Maths. It was a lonely and expensive experience.

Finally, having become very frustrated, we approached the local authority for help. They had already begun to offer various forms of help for local home educated children and were keen to provide exam access. Their negotiations with local schools proved fruitless as one after another cited various reasons not to accept home educated children.

Most schools were wary of the perceived extra work or of having to register with additional exam boards or provide invigilation for exams their own pupils were not taking, while some were reticent to allow home educated children on to the campus to mingle with schooled children!

After a year of trying, Bridgend local authority finally came to an arrangement for home educated children to sit their exams at the local FE college. This was achieved only through persistence on the local authority's part and a belief in the concept of equality of access for all children to the exam system. Having secured access, Bridgend LA then drove down the costs to a minimum.

One of my daughters took 6 GCSEs and iGCSEs this year, another took 3. The cost was met via the local home education group who were awarded money from the local authority to be spent on exam access. Candidates names and addresses were not passed on to the authority and this was a condition that the home education group placed on acceptance of the exam fees.

The authority asked to use exam results in their own reporting. It was agreed that families could decide whether or not their child's information was included, and that all information would be anonymised. It was also agreed that the authority would consider the young age of candidates and in any comparisons, would compare with children of the same year group, rather than comparing across the board with 16 year olds.

A group of 11 home educated children ended up sitting exams in a variety of subjects. They ranged from 14 to 16. The pass rate for English language iGCSE grades A to C was 87.5%, average age 15.25, and overall (across all subjects taken) the results far outstripped local schools.

The home education group employed local university students to tutor some of the teens as a group. Parents paid £6 a week which covered the tutors' time and the rental of a room. This was felt to be a reasonable cost for the service being provided, but could have been out of reach for some families.

Working as a group motivated the students and they bonded really well. This was particularly evident on results day when they had others to meet and celebrate with. If I had to do it again, I would not have spent our first year in isolation.

In this area colleges are reluctant to put home educated children on to level 2 and above courses without GCSEs, though they have been flexible in the entry requirements, for example lowering the number of GCSEs if the candidate presents well at interview. Being able to access exams at no cost has made an enormous difference to home educated young people in this area.