

Westminster Council meeting 24th November 2014

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The Chair wanted the meeting to focus on 3 areas: 1/ looking backwards at the changes from Westminster to the Triborough; 2/ future relationship between home educators and the Triborough, what might that look like; 3/ – especially with Stephen Bishop from DfE at the meeting - what councillors think of wider policy issues.

Could Westminster have done a better job of making the transition to a new policy? It is very important to get relationships right and this evidently hasn't been achieved which is a matter for regret. Relationships have obviously deteriorated. The change has not been made in a good way. How could the authority offer a better service which isn't just about intervention and legal powers. The Chair will drop a note to the Department for Education summing up the meeting.

Alison Farmer and Liz Spearman from the Triborough said: the revised policy had generated a lot of interest. They said the policy is very similar to the previous Westminster policy but has small but significant changes around a "strengthened expectation" of an annual meeting. The policy is legally compliant. A small number of families decline to meet. There is uncertainty over the number of home educated children locally and the figure of 13 children in Westminster is under-reporting the true figure. The LA has a duty to be satisfied that children are in receipt of suitable education. The LA also has a duty in regard to safeguarding and can also issue School Attendance Orders.

Officers would like the new approach endorsed and would like to develop a closer working relationship with local home educators. A working group has been set up to look at the way the LA communicates with home educators and how the LA can support home educators without changing its approach. There is a tension between parents' rights and the duties of the LA. Where children are vulnerable the LA would want to see them more often. If the LA advises families that they are not up to standard, they will also expect to see them more frequently.

The situation they inherited at Westminster was that many allegedly home educated children weren't actually home educated, the figures were very inaccurate, many had returned to school or were no longer in the area, and a small number were doing nothing at all. They don't necessarily find out about these children when they are home educated. Westminster's approach is a bit more rigorous than some, but other authorities are following suit, and at the last regional meeting there was a general will for guidance to be more robust.

Stephen Bishop from DfE said: there were between 20,000 and 80,000 home educated children, with very variable numbers in different areas across the country. Departmental Guidelines on Home Education were produced by the previous administration and are almost unique in not having been downsized during this Government. The Badman Review concluded that local authorities ought to have more powers but the legislation for a registration scheme was lost before the election.

The current Government keeps a low profile with regard to home education. It is a sensitive subject. When home education is raised the Department receives 1000s of FOIs and emails. Home educators are a well-organised lobby group.

The attitude at the Department has changed over the past 6 months because increasing numbers of local authorities are objecting and some serious case reviews have mentioned home education as an aggravating factor. There is a tension in the legislative framework. Authorities are making efforts to identify home educated children, for example getting information from GPs and hospitals.

Ministers are agreed that the department should talk at official level to local authorities. SB has had meetings with ADCS policy committee, also talked to 1 LA in the north and visited 2 regional forums of local authorities. SB has come with no commitment about what might change and when it might change, he has come to listen to people's views.

There is clearly going to be no change to the legislative framework in this parliament, and for any new government of whatever colour after the election, home education is not a legislative priority. There was a tragedy in Birmingham but the tragedy recedes, and the Government has other priorities.

Local authorities vary considerably in their approach, and it seems that authorities are toughening up their approach. A lot of LAs believe good home educators are in a minority. There is a difficulty in determining true numbers, which some authorities have termed a national disgrace.

Parents said: home educating families are well-networked for social and educational opportunities. Home educators expect LAs to abide by national guidelines. Families had excellent working relationship with previous officers at Westminster before the Triborough changes.

The former policy was agreed by the whole council, including Connexions and Safeguarding. Under the previous Westminster policy, home educators were asked to meet officers, not forced to meet and not threatened with court for not meeting. There was no consultation before the policy changed and the previous officer at Westminster has publicly dissociated himself from the new policy.

There has been talk of a Working Group but at the first meeting only 1 parent turned up. There is no confidence that the LA will act fairly or work within the law. Social life is very broad and home educated children meet with children of all ages and also with adults. People learn best when they are self motivated. Children are not stuck at home. What about innocent till proved guilty. Home educated children can take exams. The LA has powers to act if children are missing education.

Under the previous Westminster policy, home educators gave updates on what children were doing. The new policy is only a stick, with no carrot. Children have a voice and they express their opinions to people they know, they are not going to express opinion to stranger.

Compulsion is not the way to go. Some local authorities have music provision, but Westminster doesn't. Home educators don't want to be forced to do things. Other LAs help with exams but Westminster doesn't. Home educators have their own networks for help with exams. Home educators offer peer support. Networking is good. Look at the way you

treat families you DO know, nobody would come forwards voluntarily knowing they were going to be treated that way. Unacceptable for the LA to say it has to 'approve' home education.

Councillors said: home education is hard to understand. They questioned how home educated children interact with their peers and asked how do they achieve qualifications. Some families do nothing. Parents can't always provide what their children will need and children might not achieve social mobility if they lack academic qualifications.

One councillor spoke of a girl some time ago whose father refused to let her go to school said she had to be home educated which in practice meant just doing housework. The councillor raised it at the time but there was no will to do anything.

How do we find where all the children are if they drop out of school. In the wider policy context it is inconceivable that nobody knows how many children are home educated.

On the other hand, the previous policy was seen to be successful so if it wasn't broken, why change it; one or two cases are not overwhelming evidence for change. If a child is in need, other services should be picking it up.

How does Westminster compare with other LAs in London? If parents are doing a great job, why would they fear an annual check?