

I commend the Minister on all the excellent work that has taken place so far on the Bill. My representations will be on home education. I recognise the importance of safeguarding and making sure that vulnerable children do not fall through the net; however, the home-educating community is growing, diverse and caring, and those involved are fiercely passionate about their children's education and learning.

Amendments 4, 13 and 14, which stand in my name, would add to the Bill the definition of "suitable education" that already appears in section 7 of the Education Act 1996. Without these amendments, it would be left to individual local authority officers to decide what they think is suitable education.

4.00pm

Amendments 5 and 7, also in my name, are about registration and the contents of the register. They would make it no longer compulsory to provide the second parent's name if it is not relevant to the child's education. If the second parent's name is not mandatory, the lone parent cannot be sanctioned for failing to supply it. The requirement to provide two parents' names disproportionately impacts single parents, who may have to make an impossible choice between provoking their ex-partner and seeing their child forced back into school. Failure to comply may result in the lone parent having to choose between sending their child to school, which may not be the best place for them, and fines and imprisonment.

Amendments 8 to 12, which I tabled, deal with the school attendance order process. They would remove conditions C and D, which, if met, allow a notice to be served for a school attendance order. Conditions C and D are conditions in which a parent is unable or unwilling to provide information for the register.

Amendments 15 to 19, in my name, relate to home visits. Home visits are part of the school attendance order process, and my amendments would put it in the Bill that there must be reasonable grounds for refusal. A child may be extremely anxious about having strangers in their safe space—their home—who are there to scrutinise how much the child is learning, and who have the power to send the child back to school if they deem what they are learning to be insufficient. A parent may therefore feel compelled to refuse a home visit. That should not be a reason to fail their home education, so it should be put in the Bill that there may be reasonable grounds for a refusal. That cannot be left to guidance at a later date. Furthermore, it would be using a sledgehammer to crack a nut if the local authority had a statutory duty to consider all the settings in which a child is being educated, since those venues and activities will constantly be evolving. Instead, the Bill should say that the local authority may consider some of those settings.

Amendments 15 to 19 allow home visits to be refused on reasonable grounds. That would also mitigate the use of school attendance orders to deal with discrepancies in registrations. Conditions C and D in subsections (6) and (7) of proposed new section 436H of the Education Act 1996 would otherwise have a disproportionate impact on lone-parent households, which are mostly headed by mothers. Under proposed new section 436C, details of both parents would be required for the register, while proposed new section 436D imposes a legal duty on parents to supply that information. Without my amendments, proposed new section 436I could create a situation in which a lone parent who is scared to supply information about an absent parent or former partner is put at risk of reprisals from the non-resident parent, whose address will also be visited, as one of the homes in which the child lives.

Finally, I would like to give the House a message from many of my constituents who are home educators. There are some who say, "Home educators do a good job, but". A whole community is dismissed in seven words. Just for once, can we acknowledge the thousands of families who are taking responsibility for their children's education, often as a result of shortcomings in the school system, as was rightly said by the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness Graham Stuart. Their work, and that of their children, should be appreciated and valued. We should not stigmatise home education; if child protection laws and systems fail, it is they that should require scrutiny.