



Home Education Centre

The Role of Third Sector Innovation: Personalisation of Education and Learning.

Call for Evidence

Submission on behalf of The Home Education Centre, Somerset,
by Zena Hodgson (Support Officer, HEC)

The Home Education Centre (HEC) is a voluntary group developed and run by home educating parents. It is a learning centre and meeting place for families from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds to share skills, advice and support. The HEC also works on developing relationships with the local authorities and colleges, so they may better understand the home educating community. The day to day running of sessions is the role of all the members, although the management and smooth running is overseen by the committee. The centre currently has around 60 children attending, with an age range of 0 – 16 yrs of age. Approximately 20 more families are on a waiting list keen to join. The HEC also supports other home educating families across the country, by helping them establish similar groups to fulfil their community's needs.

PRIORITY 1: How can the third sector offer choice and influence to children and young people through greater participation?

- *How does your organisation offer choice and influence to children and young people through participation?*

The philosophy of HEC is that we want to bring to the mainstream a new vision of education, one in which children are empowered to direct their own learning. Home educating families have rejected the one size fits all education found in the classroom. They set about providing their children with a more personalised education that reflects their child's individual needs and aspirations. At HEC we aim to help further this personalised education, by giving the children who attend the opportunity to be part of the decision making process. We encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning and thereby influence their learning outcomes. HEC harnesses all the skills and expertise of its families in order to provide group activities and experiences which are difficult to provide in a home setting.

Home Educating families are a very diverse group with many different learning styles, cultural backgrounds and philosophies. At HEC we strive for secular, common ground and to this end we have regular 'house' meetings of all members (adults and children) in order to discuss ongoing developments and share information. The children have written their own charter, which is discussed and re-ratified every year. All activities and workshops that take place at HEC are in response to the desired learning areas as expressed by the children attending. Each term we hold a house meeting to ask the children what it is that they would like to learn throughout the coming months. We then match up the parents' skills and areas of expertise to fulfil the

info@homeeducationcentre.org.uk

www.homeeducationcentre.org.uk



Home Education Centre

children's requests. We regularly review the schedules of activities for sessions through the year. At the end of each term we ask the children to give the committee written feedback about the sessions they attended. All the activities are non-compulsory, but as they are at the children's request, they all have regular attendance.

In terms of the ladder of participation, the children, as the main 'service users' of HEC have a combination of 'participation' and 'sharing power'.

- *What are the barriers to third sector organisations offering greater choice and influence through participation?*

As an innovative learning centre the main barrier is lack of understanding and funding. As a voluntary group we are financially dependent on session fees from our members and upon gaining funding. We have to keep session fees low as home educating families generally rely on one income or in the case of one parent families, low or no income. There is currently no government funding available to support individual home educating families. In order to gain funding at HEC for resources and equipment to facilitate the children's learning, we need to gain understanding and recognition.

HEC currently hires a community building to run sessions two full days a week. This is obviously a shared community resource and therefore we cannot have autonomy over the use of the space. It can therefore be hard to reach our full potential of provision, as some of the activities requested by the children have to be restricted or denied due to unsuitability of the building for those particular activities. Although we have an exclusive storage cupboard, we cannot equip particular rooms in readiness for particular activities. For an example, many children at HEC would like to carry out more in depth science investigations and it would be beneficial to have a room fit for purpose in terms of safety and ease of access to equipment, in order to maximise this area of learning.

Also, due to the limited size and availability of our hired premises we are unable to expand our membership to HEC. There is an obvious need in the community to do this as reflected in our ever increasing waiting list.

- *What could you or your organisation do to help overcome these barriers?*

HEC works to develop a positive working relationship between our organisation and outside agencies. We aim to demonstrate successful innovation in alternative educational provision that can be applied to help shape personalised education within the mainstream. We hope that by sharing our model with outside agencies such as local and national government, the media, further and higher education and the home educating community generally, that any barriers through lack of understanding of our educational provision will be overcome. Through gaining further recognition, we hope that more funding opportunities and support will be more forthcoming.

The HEC committee in addition to maintaining the day to day running of the centre, work to produce and effectuate longer term development plans.

info@homeeducationcentre.org.uk

www.homeeducationcentre.org.uk



Home Education Centre

- *What could commissioners do to enable third sector organisations to overcome these barriers?*

There is great disparity in the support received and the treatment of home educating families and groups when they seek advice or make contact with their local authority. The Commissioners should be ensuring that all home educated children and their families are treated fairly, honestly and receive competent fit advice by their local authority. Commissioners could ensure that local authorities and other children's services receive better training in both the legal aspects and methodology of home education as a real alternative to mainstream education.

Children's learning takes place at HEC in a form that is very different to what the current mainstream or state's view of education should look like. It is none the less very effective. Commissioners could encourage local authorities and other children's services to recognise the value of the truly personalised learning that takes place within home education and groups such as HEC. More trust and open minded support should be given to innovative third sector organisations to allow them to develop their ideas, without fear of imposed changes to bring them more inline with mainstream convention of what is suitable education. Through more encouragement and less interference, third sector learning organisations can contribute to the range of choices available in education for children and young people today.

- *What could Government do to enable third sector organisations to overcome these barriers?*

Government could ensure that local authorities follow the DCSF [Elective Home Education Guidelines for local Authorities](#), perhaps by making them statutory. More money could be made available for better training of local authorities and children's services with respect to the law and guidelines surrounding home education.

Even more importantly, Government could make money available for home educated children and families if they request support. Currently there is no money to support home educating families or groups such as HEC. Money does not follow the child into home education. Families have to carry the full financial burden of educating their children at home, including resources, SEN provisions and exam entry. HEC would be able to facilitate more of the children's requested learning experiences if funding was available for home educated children in the same way as it is for children attending school.

- *Does your organisation have untapped potential to offer choice and influence to children and young people through participation? If so, how could this potential be realised?*

With every family that joins HEC, there are new skills and ideas added to the organisation. Parents have many life skills and experiences, job/career skills and areas



Home Education Centre

of expertise that are invaluable to the learning experiences of children and young people. Every child that joins HEC brings their own ideas and aspirations that allows them to help shape theirs and others learning outcomes.

If HEC were able to expand, offering membership to more families in the community, more parents and children would be able to contribute; thus adding many more and varied learning experiences for young people to participate in.

If HEC and other organisations like it, had a higher profile in the community, then many more children and families would be aware of their choices available in education. Mainstream schooling does not suit every child, but not all children and families are aware that there are legal alternatives.

Full time home education also does not suit every child, but with more alternative educational organisations and centres like HEC, maybe a more liberal system of flex-schooling could be put into place. This would allow families to choose a combination of school attendance and home education with, if desired, the support of third sector organisations, to truly build a personalised education for their child.

PRIORITY 2: How can the third sector be supported to work together, tailoring services around the needs of individual children and young people?

- *How does your organisation tailor its services?*

By its very nature of being developed and run by the attending families, it is perfectly tailored to the members needs. All members of HEC have a voice, both adult and child and the organisation continually reflects and adapts to meet the needs of its current members.

- *How does your organisation work with other providers to tailor services?*

If the children or young people of HEC request support that we feel we are unable to fulfil in house, we seek support from another service provider. As an example; some of our children want to sit GCSE examinations and although they are able to study the courses easily enough, it can be very difficult for them to find an external exam centre that will accept them. The HEC committee therefore looked at how we might overcome this barrier for our children. We started by inviting local colleges into HEC for a visit, to make them aware of home educated students, outlining our young people's needs to them. We identified one college that was particularly receptive to the idea of helping home educated students. Then through a series of meetings with HEC, the college and the local authority we were able to secure an external exam centre in the area, at the college, for all home educated children, whether they attended HEC or not. In addition home educated students are able to access some



Home Education Centre

of the college courses through non-standard entry requirements. The local authority has also agreed to pay for the GCSE examinations of registered children. The whole process took about 9 months.

As and when needed, we work with other providers in this way, by first inviting them into HEC so that they might get a better understanding of our educational provision and then working with them to see how they might adapt their service to meet our children's needs.

▪ *How does your organisation work with infrastructure/ umbrella/ membership organisations in order to tailor its services?*

HEC, the way it is set up and run, is unlike many other home education groups in the country. We are also lucky enough to be placed in a progressively forward thinking county. Therefore we are leading the way in overcoming some of the barriers that home educators and home educating groups face, such as:

- As outlined in the previous prompt question; we have managed to help secure an external exam centre for home educated students in the area.
- In December 2008 Somerset County Council awarded the Home Education Centre a £10,000 grant for equipment to cover the learning requirements of home educated children aged between 0-16 years old. The centre co-wrote the contract, chose and purchased the equipment. This was the first of its kind in the UK.
- Somerset County have asked HEC to provide the copy for a leaflet about home education. This will be rolled out to all children's providers and services in the county.
- HEC is currently working with Connexions to establish what services our young people will be able to access if required.

HEC is now using the experience gained in personalising our own provision and from working with other providers to help similar groups to establish themselves. Helping them to find their own solutions to meet their own individual children's needs.

HEC also takes an interest in national issues affecting home educators and home educating groups, as ultimately this also has an effect on how we are able to facilitate our children's learning needs. HEC was recently invited to give oral evidence as a witness before the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee looking into the Elective Home Education review by Graham Badman. Members of the HEC committee also attended the Education Otherwise Parliamentary event at the House of Commons; the event gave MPs a chance to meet home educators, to learn more about home education and to hear what children had to say.

▪ *What are the barriers to working together and tailoring your services?*

Currently, other children and young people's support services are not usually familiar enough with home education. At HEC we find that if we need to approach another



Home Education Centre

service provider to help fulfil the learning requests of our young people, we have to go through a lengthy 'training' period of that service provider. They are usually very receptive to working with us to arrive at a successful outcome for our home educated young people, but at the start of the process are very ignorant to how are our children learn.

Some Children's service providers are harder to access than others. Many are designed to work alongside the state system of education and are very inflexible to the needs of home educated children.

▪ *What could commissioners do to enable third sector organisations to overcome these barriers?*

As previously mentioned, commissioners could ensure that there is a greater awareness and understanding of home educators in the community. They could work to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to secure easier access to a variety of children's services, for children not following a mainstream route in their education. Opportunities and support in learning that school children are entitled to, should also be made available to third sector organisations such as HEC.

▪ *What could Government do to enable third sector organisations to overcome these barriers?*

Government could give other providers more autonomy over the way in which they operate. If the legislation and guidelines that these providers have to adhere to were less prescriptive, it would be easier for them to adapt to meet the personalised needs of individuals.

As an example; a number of teachers in mainstream schools are calling for more flexibility in the way they are allowed to deliver their provision. It can be hard for teachers to tailor their services and respond to the needs of their class, whilst adhering to the national curriculum and targets imposed on the school. Schools are in the most part unwilling to accept home educated children as external candidates for exams or allow them to use the school as part of a flexi-schooling system. This is because, having some students as part of their cohort who are only part-time can have a negative effect on the target outcomes for the school. Under present target criteria, allowing young people to dip in and out of school provision is difficult to facilitate, because unless schools have full control and full attendance of an individual students' education, the school's statistical targets can be negatively affected.

▪ *Does your organisation have untapped potential to tailor its services? If so, how could this potential be realised?*

We tailor our services to meet needs which can be ever changing as the group develops and expands. A degree of potential remains untapped in some areas of development,



Home Education Centre

because of the limitations of accessible funding. As far as we are aware, because we are a unique model, we often do not fit into specific predetermined boxes to access funding. We are not just simply, a 'family centre' or a 'place of education' or a 'youth centre'. We are a group that cannot be defined using mainstream criteria. We have enormous potential and need to be able to access funding to continue to develop it.

PRIORITY 3: How can the third sector scale up and mainstream innovative personalised services?

- *Do you have an example of a personalised third sector service that is now delivering at a significant scale as part of mainstream provision? If so, how was this achieved?*

Home education is a long-standing, tried and tested alternative to mainstream education. In fact home education was the mainstream provision for a much longer period in our history than that which we recognise as mainstream today. The education system that we have today was born out of a need to change, to meet the needs of the industrial revolution and developing world workforce. In many ways it served its purpose very well. However, the country is going through another massive technological change and education is going to need to be more diverse, personalised and innovative to keep up with the pace of change.

Home education is the ultimate personalised education for a child and there has and continues to be a significant rise in numbers of families choosing this option in recent years. The flexibility and diversity that home education allows, means that individuals are able to keep up and adapt to our fast changing, social, educational and work environments.

Through the continued emergence of other support groups like HEC and work that other national home education organisations do to raise the profile of home education, it is becoming once again a real alternative in the educational landscape.

HEC is certainly growing at a considerable pace with more families than we are able to presently accommodate wanting to join us. The numbers of home educators who are keen set up similar self-help voluntary support organisations is also on the increase all over the UK. HEC has already shared its expertise and experience in this area, helping groups to set up in Somerset, Dorset, Northamptonshire, Cornwall and Kent.

- *What are the barriers to scaling up personalised third sector services?*

Disparity of local authorities in the way in which they understand and treat home educating families, means that the level of support home educators receive is extremely variable. Although home educating families may have the support and advice of HEC or other similar such organisations, if they do not have a positive response or support from their local authority, it can be very difficult. Home educators can suffer discriminatory



Home Education Centre

treatment making it hard to freely personalise their education, which in turn can make it hard work getting a support group established.

▪ *What could commissioners do to enable third sector organisations to scale up personalised services?*

As with 'Priority 1 and 2' previously, commissioners need to ensure that local authorities understand the law and guidelines concerning home education. They could ensure that all home educated children and their families are treated fairly, honestly and receive competent fit advice by their local authority.

▪ *What could Government do to enable third sector organisations to scale up personalised services?*

See previous response with regards to 'Priority 1' .

▪ *How can the third sector work with schools and colleges to develop and embed personalised services in mainstream education and learning services?*

HEC has already established a good working relationship with a local college. HEC has helped to secure non-standard entry for home educated students on college courses and establish an external exam centre for sitting GCSEs. This demonstrates that with open mindedness and flexibility of approach, entry into higher education can be successfully achieved whether following an innovative personalised education or mainstream.

The same could be true with regards to access to school facilities if home educators requested them. If schools could adopt a more flexible approach to learning, then home educating families could benefit from some of the resources available within the mainstream framework if and when required.

HEC and other third sector organisations could work with schools to help them develop different approaches to learning. As an example, HEC runs non-compulsory learning activities which are open to all age groups attending the centre. We do not segregate children by their age, but the activities are well attended by a self-selecting range of children who are interested in the activity and have the appropriate understanding and ability to learn and enjoy participating. We find that children are capable of identifying activities within their own learning capabilities.