

Climate of suspicion over home education is adding to workload of social workers

It would be a most unusual social worker who clamoured for extra, unnecessary work. Yet media rhetoric and those driving it are creating an additional workload with home educating families. If such reports are to be believed, the home educated child is ‘hidden’, or ‘invisible’, at risk of radicalisation, female genital mutilation, physical abuse and neglect.

The recent increase in media articles about home education has raised public interest, resulting in debate in council chambers, private homes, social media and amongst organisations such as the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS).

It also led to calls in Parliament and from the Department for Education (DfE) to introduce monitoring of all home educated families through compulsory visits involving interviews with children. In short, the same level of assessment as when a referral is received that a child may be suffering or at risk of serious harm.

The DfE recently published guidance for local authorities on how to discharge their duties toward home educated children under the Education Act 1996. It contains the following statement:

‘There is no proven correlation between home education and safeguarding risk. In some serious cases of neglect or abuse in recent years, the child concerned has been home educated but that has not usually been a causative factor and the child has normally been known anyway to the relevant local authority.’

Yet the guidance goes on to direct local authority attention to the need to consider referral to children’s social services, where there is doubt about the efficacy of the education provided.

Education officers have powers to address inadequate education under the Education Act 1996 s437, but it remains the fact that social workers are bearing the brunt of this attention.

If the media reports are true and home educated children are at increased safeguarding risk, social workers would quite rightly want to receive referrals and act robustly to protect the children concerned. But are they?

In 2015, research found home educated children to be approximately twice as likely to be referred to Social Services as at risk, at 9.39 – 10.19%, than were children aged 0-4 years at 5.24% and children aged 5-16 who attend school at 4.93%. Yet those home educated children were considerably less likely to be subject to a child protection plan (CPP)^[1].

In 2017 radicalisation was examined^[2] and 146 local authorities in England confirmed that no home educated child in their area had been radicalised (six did not respond). There is also a significant body of research which finds home educated children to be socially well adjusted and educationally on a par with, or ahead of, their schooled peers.

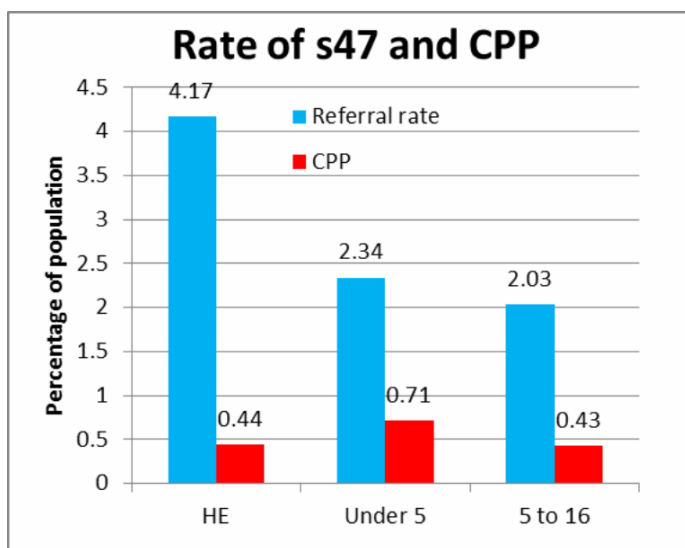
Yet the rhetoric continues unabated. So is there a new problem? The 2015 research has been revisited to look at the picture in 2019 and it is apparent that social workers are subject to unnecessary increased workload as a result of being asked to assess home educated children.

All local authorities in England were asked to respond to a freedom of information request detailing how many home educated children are in their area, how many home educated children were referred for assessment under the Children Act 1989 s47 and how many of those referrals resulted in child protection plans (CPP) being required. Comparative data was obtained for children aged under 5 years and those aged 5-16 years.

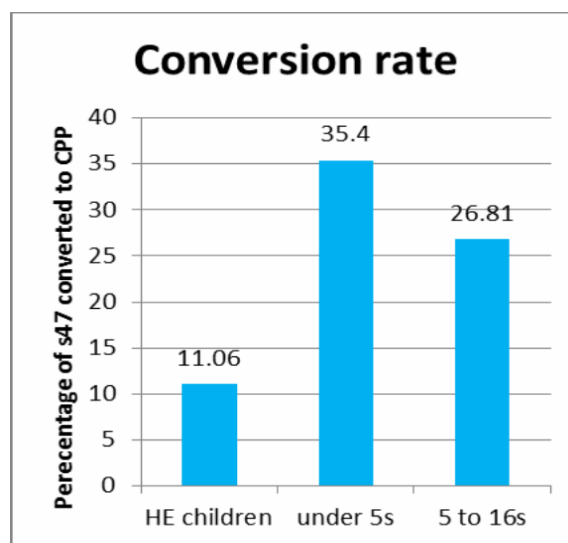
4.2% of all home educated children were referred under the Children Act 1989 s47, compared to 2.3% of under five-year-olds and 2.0% of 5-16-year olds, giving statistically significant higher referral rates for home educated children than other children. Alarming, one local authority reported a nearly 40 per cent referral rate for home educated children (authority ‘X’). Yet in local authority ‘X’ only 3.0% of under 5s were referred for assessment and 2.3% of 5-16 year olds.

Does this higher referral rate for home educated children indicate a greater need for assessment of those children, or is another factor driving the rate difference? If that higher rate was justified, we would see a corresponding higher rate of CPPs amongst home educated children, but that is simply not the case.

Only 0.4 per cent of home educated children were subsequently subject to a CPP, compared to 0.7 per cent of children under five and 0.4 per cent of children aged five to 16. The rate for conversion from s47 assessment to CPP was 11 per cent for home educated children - 35.4 per cent for under five-year-olds and 26.8 per cent for children aged five to 16 years. In local authority 'X', no single home educated child was subject to a CPP (despite nearly 40 per cent of those children being referred as at risk of suffering significant harm).



Rate of CPP following assessment under the Children Act 1989 s47



Conversion rate from s47 to CPP

Given that the rate of CPPs amongst home educated children is close to that in other children aged 5-16 years, it seems clear that a significant number of referrals under the category of child at risk are unnecessary. And it is the social worker in the field who carries the weight of this problem.

We must never discourage people from contacting the authorities if they have genuine concern for the safety of children. But social workers will be aware that some referrals are malicious, or simply ill informed. Few working with children will have not come across the ex-partner trying to point score against the parent of their children, for example. But this does not explain the significantly higher referral rate for home educated children.

On the back of fear that a child may be harmed if home educated children are not subjected to oversight, health visitors are now routinely reporting any child who is home educated, as are hospitals, GP practices and education officers lawfully refused access to family homes.

In addition, it is common practice for school staff to report 'a child at risk' when a parent removes the child from a school in order to be home educated. Anecdotal evidence indicates that these latter referrals owe more about protecting the school-based pedagogy and lack of understanding, than evidenced concerns about the child's safety. If the concern was not there prior to removal from the roll, why would it suddenly manifest at that stage?

These referrals solely on the basis that the child is home educated breach the Data Protection Act 2018 and the GDPR, as data sharing without consent requires a high threshold to be met before it is lawful. Nonetheless such referrals are rising exponentially.

Anecdotal evidence from those advising and assisting home educated parents, indicates that when the majority of referrals to social services are made purely on the basis of the child being home educated, the social worker is well able to recognise that there is no further action necessary.

This minimises the additional burden on the social worker's workload. The 2015 research looked at all such referrals, finding a rate amongst home educated children of over ten per cent.

The most recent research looks only at those referrals where it is not immediately apparent that no action is required and consequently a s47 assessment is made, creating additional workload.

Most usually, this is because the referrer is a respected professional whose concerns are treated more seriously than referrals from other individuals. The social worker spends time and resources that they can ill

afford investigating the referral, only to find that the matter does not require a CPP. This of itself diminishes the greatly needed time social workers can give to cases where children are at serious risk of harm.

So what can be done to alleviate this problem in order to reduce unnecessary wastage of resources by social workers? The most obvious step is policy guidance for education officers, GPs, health visitors and NHS staff that home education is not of itself a safeguarding issue. If referrers are encouraged to recognise that fact and to apply the same criteria to home educated children as they do to other children, a reduction in unnecessary referrals should logically follow.

Social work representatives, such as the ADCS should also reflect on their approach in the interests of social workers at the coal face. They should recognise that where you have a similar rate of CPP in the home educated population compared to the general peer population but a significantly higher rate of referral, something, somewhere is going wrong.

Unfortunately the ADCS is not immune from susceptibility to media rhetoric, as seen by their statements about home educated children being at risk of radicalisation, despite research demonstrating that they are not^[3]. That claim by the ADCS was traced to a media source, which underlines the dangers of biased and sensationalist media reporting.

We all like to think of ourselves as being above the influence of the type of ‘othering’ used by the media, to create stories which stigmatise a group, or groups, of people. Social workers, no matter their level of competence and professionalism, are not immune to the insidious drip feed of negative misinformation.

Social work departments are usually short staffed and social workers have a heavy workload. They clearly do not need this unwarranted extra work to be added to that load and those social workers working with children and their representatives, need to make a professional stand to resist the clarion call of universal referral for home educated children. Professionalism calls for them to stop this march before it is too late.

References:

- 1] Charles-Warner, W (2015) ‘Home Education and the Safeguarding Myth’ [Online]
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- 3] Statement made in correspondence from ADCS to Nicky Morgan MP, dated 22 May 2015. Available from: adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_President_to_Secretary_of_State_Nicky_Morgan_May_2015.pdf