

Transcript of discussion about Home Education

Radio 4, Woman's Hour, Friday 31 January, 2020

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Discussion started at 12 minutes into the programme. Timings below are from that point.

Jenni Murray - [00:00:00]

You may have read in the newspapers yesterday about an unnamed boy who had suffered four years of terrible abuse at the hands of his parents. He'd been effectively out of sight because the parents had said he was being schooled at home. Well, they have been jailed. But his experience has led to questions about the rules surrounding home schooling, which is thought to involve some 60,000 children in the UK. Do they need to be reviewed? Well, I'm joined by Wendy Charles-Warner, a trustee for Education Otherwise and the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield. Anne, what does this Northamptonshire case demonstrate for you?

Anne Longfield - [00:00:43]

Well, good morning. Once again it demonstrates the terrible experience and dangers that can occur when children are hidden from view. In this case, as you say, kept out of sight by parents who were keen to avoid the, the light of the authorities. They did so under the auspices of home schooling that so many parents are choosing to do, but they can all elect to do - which has very loose regulation. The local authorities didn't know the child was there, or didn't look for them. The NHS, which you might expect would notice that the child wasn't attending checks, didn't do so, and the Serious Case Review concluded that there need to be serious reform of home schooling, something I have agreed with for some time, and something that the Government acted on last year with commitment to introduce a new register for children who weren't attending school.

Jenni Murray - [00:01:43]

Now Wendy, given this case as such a terrible example, what do you make of the idea of a national register so that at least people can keep track of children who are being schooled at home?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:01:59]

I think actually that we're asking the wrong question, because we're not talking about a child who was unseen, unknown or hidden. We're talking about a child who was well known to Social Services. The school nurse had been persistent in seeking to report the child, and services could have acted. I can quote something Anne said in, about Northamptonshire Children's Services, in 2019, "They failed to protect the most vulnerable children and have a dysfunctional safeguarding system." Unfortunately that, that becomes extrapolated and home education becomes a whipping boy for a problem which is actually a Social Services problem. There is, there is a system in place for dealing with problems where you cannot find information about a child's education. The local authority can make an inquiry. If the parent doesn't respond, the local authority can take action for a school attendance. If they have concerns about the welfare of the child, the matter should and ought to be referred to Social Services. Unfortunately the referrals to, to Social Services in this instance simply failed.

Jenni Murray - [00:03:20]

Anne, let me put this point to you. What real difference would a national register really make? We know there was only one part-time local authority officer in Northamptonshire to keep an eye on home schooled children. An estimated thousand of them.

Anne Longfield - [00:03:37]

And I've been really clear that Northamptonshire have been very poor for some time. And clearly there are huge concerns about how they acted here. But just to tackle this, this issue about whether this is about home-schooling or there not. I have always supported the rights of parents to choose to educate their children at home. I applaud when they do it well and never focused on that. But I'm also very aware that this huge increase includes lots of parents who haven't done this by choice, they've just ended up in the situation, and some who are actively using the loose regulation and lax regulation as a way of disappearing from view and avoiding the authorities. Now, it's those children that I am really concerned about and what councils say, good or bad, is that they don't know which children are being home educated in their area, and having a register would enable them and help them to do that. Now I don't think for all of those parents that clearly have huge concern around their family's future and are absolutely investing their time and energy into home-schooling as a result of that, I don't think it's too much to ask or too big a burden to have a register. I think it's sensible and I think it will help.

Jenni Murray - [00:04:56]

Wendy, there is evidence that the numbers are going up, and perhaps some of them are going up because of school exclusions, so the parents are not choosing to school their children at home. Surely that adds to the need for keeping track of those children?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:05:14]

Actually, the great, in order to have some intervention with people's lives, you need to have a rationale behind it. And actually, recently the numbers have been dropping because action has been taken on off-rolling, and off-rolling is what Anne's talking about. In practice.

Jenni Murray - [00:05:35]

What do you mean by off-rolling?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:05:36]

Off-rolling. Apologies, I should have explained. off-rolling is when, rather than choosing to home educate, a parent is pressured into doing so by the school, in order to prevent any reflection of bad performance or attendance on the school.

Jenni Murray - [00:05:53]

So, the same as exclusion really?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:05:55]

It's, it's, the parent is coerced into taking the child out of school. But Anne made a point, that these children need to be known and, seen and known about. But any child who is removed from school is known about. The local authority has a legal obligation to notify, the school sorry, has a legal obligation to notify the local authority about that child. So parents cannot remove a child from school and hide that child if everybody involved acts according to the regulations.

Jenni Murray - [00:06:31]

So Anne, if the child has been removed or excluded, they're known about - they're not hidden?

Anne Longfield - [00:06:38]

But there are two things here. One is that if a family moves areas between local authority areas that new council won't know. It's only at the point where the child leaves the school, and there'll be some children who will never have been to school. And the other is that families don't have to let the agencies in, if they

ask to visit. And we know from research last year that nearly a third of families don't. I think this is something which is just a sensible step forward which would help councils who, you know, we would hope would be fulfilling their responsibilities. But we know also that they're saying themselves they need help. And it would also really ensure that those children had others who were able to see them. We could be sure that they were safe and also getting the education that they need. I've got to say this is very light touch compared to some countries. In Jersey, parents have to apply every year, and they're actually assessed in terms of education, so I don't think government's gone over the top on this at all, and they are proposing that they'll also offer to support and pay for exams I think, for children who are home-schooled. So I do think there is the possibility of additional support for those families who need it.

Jenni Murray - [00:07:58]

Wendy, given that we know a lot of the parents who do this do it by choice and they're doing a very good job, why are they so scared of being registered?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:08:09]

There are several aspects to it, but can I first of all make a point here that..

Jenni Murray - [00:08:13]

Well, just answer that question - why are they so scared?

Wendy Charles-Warner - [00:08:18]

Yes, of course, sorry. Right, there, there are several aspects to it. What parents report to me is firstly they don't want the stigma. Their children are already stigmatized by negative media reports and the, the whole concept that is put across that they are abused children. Home educated children are not abused children. But there is this stigma. Parents are deeply distressed by the stigmatization that being required to register would cause for them. There's also, another point that they raise is the thin end of the wedge argument. Currently on the last, on the last occasion we assessed it, almost all bar maybe a dozen local authorities of the one hundred and fifty-two in England were not compliant with, with the legislation and guidance. Almost all local authorities do not currently comply. So the argument on parents' behalf is, if we give them further powers, that will end in further non-compliance.

Jenni Murray - [00:09:25]

Anne, just one final point on this, why increase the stigma?

Anne Longfield - [00:09:30]

I don't think it does increase the stigma. I think actually arguing against regulation in this way raises concerns about why that would be. I think we, everyone, would want children to be safe and educated and there are a very small few who are using the banner of home education quite wrongly to, to actually disappear from view. And if it saves a very small number of children terrible experiences, I would hope everyone would think it was worth it.

Jenni Murray - [00:10:03]

Anne Longfield and Wendy Charles- Warner, thank you both very much indeed for being with us.