



Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State

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Dear 

Review of Elective Home Education in England

Thank you for your *Review of Elective Home Education* which you submitted to me on 1 June and which covers the terms of reference included in Annex A to your report. I welcome this comprehensive and thoughtful review which has taken account of more than 2000 submissions from home educating parents, as well as contributions from 90 local authorities (LAs), and many other organisations and individuals that work with home educating families.

The terms of reference asked you to investigate the barriers LAs and other public agencies face in carrying out their safeguarding responsibilities; whether LAs were providing effective and appropriate support; and whether there was evidence of home education being used as a 'cover' for child abuse. You were also asked to analyse whether home educating families were appropriately supported by their LAs and to advise whether any changes are needed to the current regime for monitoring home education.

The Written Ministerial Statement presented to the House today recognises that your review presents strong arguments for change to existing arrangements in order to strike a better balance between the rights of children and parents. Your review recommends that the relationship between home educators and LAs has to be placed on a different footing, with LAs providing more support to enrich the opportunities open to home educated children and ensure they achieve the outcomes set out in 'Every Child Matters'. Your review describes a relationship within which mutual respect and understanding enable parents and LAs to work together in the best interests of children. I am aware that the review identified encouraging good practice from which we can learn, but that we need to explore how all LAs can reach or exceed the best practice you observed.



department for
children, schools and families

I accept all the recommendations in your report that call for urgent action to improve safeguards for home educated children and we will introduce these as soon as possible, subject to identifying funding and workable delivery arrangements. We will consider how best to respond to your other recommendations as we will need to work through their implementation and resource implications.

Improving safeguards for home educated children

You make a compelling case for immediate and urgent reforms to ensure all home educated children are known to and monitored by local authorities, and that there is a proportionate focus on ensuring these children are safe. I am reassured that your review found no evidence that home education is being used to cover up forced marriage, servitude or child trafficking, but we are also concerned about evidence presented to you by LAs and others which details a significant number of cases where there are – or have been - safeguarding concerns about home educated children. I also note that you found that in some authorities, the numbers of home educated children known to children's services because of safeguarding or other concerns, are disproportionately high relative to the overall numbers being home educated in their areas.

The review recommends that all home educated children are registered with their LA. The purpose of registration is twofold: it will ensure that any safeguarding concerns are identified at the point home education begins, and it will check that parents have realistic plans in place to provide home educated children with a 'suitable' education. A key feature of registration is that where there are safeguarding concerns, children will no longer be able to be home educated.

We accept that LAs need greater powers to monitor home educated children to confirm they are safe and receiving a suitable education. The current arrangements only require LAs to make enquiries to satisfy themselves that a suitable education is being provided: they have no powers to insist that any evidence is presented. We do not think that this provides sufficient reassurance that home educated children are safe and receiving a suitable education. We agree that home educated children must be seen regularly in their education setting, on their own, or with an independent person present as appropriate, so the LA can verify that the evidence of progress presented to them is up-to-date and accurate and confirm that these children are safe.

In line with your review's recommendations, we are today launching a consultation on changes to the existing statutory arrangements for home education, which will introduce a range of safeguards for home educated children. We will introduce these changes at the earliest possible opportunity, taking account of consultation responses.

The review also recommended better monitoring information and stronger accountability through the Children's Trust and Local Safeguarding Children Board as important means of promoting the well-being of home educated children. We accept these recommendations in principle, subject to the outcomes of additional work we will do on costs and delivery mechanisms. Your recommendations on information sharing between the different parts of the local authority will be implemented through the revision of *Working Together to Safeguard Children* which

is to be developed by the end of the year.

Better support for home educating families

The review puts forward a persuasive case for better support for home educating families. It recommends that LAs provide support to help families prepare for home education, and that DCSF sets out more clearly the kinds of practical arrangements that should be made. Specifically, it asks DCSF to review the current definitions of 'efficient' and 'suitable' education in a way that is pragmatic and that supports home educated children in receiving a broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated curriculum. It recommends better training for LA officers engaged in supporting or monitoring home education, and also that Ofsted monitors LA performance with regard to their support for home educating families.

The review goes on to recommend that LAs should offer a menu of support to home educating families, such as access to examination centres and payment of examination fees, sports facilities, post-14 vocational opportunities, work experience and music tuition.

We agree there is more to be done in providing support to home educating families, including better access to wider public services. However, this is a difficult and sensitive area, given the wide range of approaches to home education that the review team observed, and uncertainties over the number of home educated children and the demand for services. We accept there are difficulties for home educators and other learners – including adults – in accessing the examination system and we are committed to finding a resolution to these problems.

Home educated children with special educational needs (SEN)

LAs already have a range of duties and powers that cover children with SEN who are home educated. However, evidence submitted to the review suggests these duties and powers are not consistently applied. We will therefore issue non-statutory guidance to LAs so they are clear about the way in which their existing responsibilities apply to home educated children. In addition, you will be aware that Brian Lamb, the Chair of the Special Educational Consortium, is conducting an inquiry into parental confidence in the SEN system. I am asking Brian to take account of your review in his final report in September and also for Ofsted to report on any issues relating to home educated children in its own review of SEN should they arise. That review is due to report in summer 2010. I will also ask Ofsted to consider conducting a survey of this particular group in their next survey programme in 2010-11. On the basis of any recommendations arising from this work we will consider whether there should be changes to the SEN framework to provide more support to parents who are home educating children with SEN.

We are taking decisive action today to tackle the immediate safeguarding concerns highlighted in your review. However, we recognise there is far more to be done to nurture a more positive relationship between LAs and home educating families. Building a consensus around this new approach will take time, energy and goodwill. It will need to be done gradually, not least through identifying, evaluating and disseminating good practice.

We are acting immediately to address the review's recommendations on safeguarding by issuing a consultation on new statutory arrangements today. We want to reflect further on all of the recommendations in the review so that we have a better understanding of the practical issues and financial impact of implementation. We will publish a fuller response to the individual recommendations by the end of September 2009.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Ed Balls', consisting of a stylized 'E' and 'B'.

ED BALLS MP