

NSS backs home education reform

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The National Secular Society has backed a registration scheme and improved guidance for parents and local authorities in a [submission](#) to a government consultation on elective home education (EHE).

The NSS said a registration scheme would be a "minimal imposition" which would help to safeguard children's rights without unduly undermining the autonomy of families who choose to educate children at home.

It added that registration would ensure home schooling provision was "not used as a cover for or gateway to unregistered (illegal) schools".

The NSS was responding to a call for evidence [launched](#) by the Department for Education (DfE) after it published draft guidance in April. This was in response to NSS honorary associate Lord Soley [introducing](#) a private member's bill to register and monitor children receiving home education last year.

The NSS [campaigns](#) to protect the right of children in out-of-school educational settings to a proper education and has played a crucial part in highlighting abuses by religious groups.

In its submission the NSS agreed with the DfE that out-of-school educational settings should not face "unnecessary regulatory burdens". But it added that proportionate measures should be taken to ensure those providing intensive tuition are adequately safeguarding children's welfare.

"Simply put the more like a school setting appears the more like a school it should be treated."

While compiling its evidence the NSS researched the elective home education (EHE) policies – or lack of them – of every local education authority (LEA) in England.

The society found that LEAs vary widely in the steps they take to ensure EHE is suitable, and that inconsistent involuntary registration schemes mean they do not always fulfil their duty to ensure children receive a "suitable" education. Some LEAs also say they have been unable to fulfil their responsibilities due to lack of resources.

The draft guidance makes clear the DfE's view that "suitable" education "should not foreclose the child's options in later life". The NSS said EHE which only prepares children for life within a specific community should be considered "by definition unsuitable". It added that EHE should not be deemed "suitable" where it undermines fundamental human rights.

NSS education and schools officer Alastair Lichten said all young people – whatever their religious background – deserve the right to an open future, as it is essential to respecting their freedom of belief.

"Of course in safeguarding this right we need to balance the rights of others – including the autonomy of home educating families. The state should focus on the outcomes, not the motivations, of elective home education.

"A situation where those choosing EHE were subject to increased scrutiny based on their religious motivation would be concerning, just as a situation where authorities are hesitant to take proper safeguarding action due to misplaced religious sensitivities would be."

The NSS also noted that it had encountered a small number of cases where parents have felt pressured into EHE because a lack of religiously neutral school provision.

In a debate in the Public Bill Committee on Tuesday, Julia Lopez MP [proposed](#) an amendment to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill to "exclude from home educating any household of which a member has been convicted of a terrorist offence".

In March a Metropolitan Police study [found](#) that half of 70 known extremists in London had withdrawn their children from state education to educate them at home.

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