

NSS welcomes home education reform and registration scheme

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a government plan requiring local authorities and families to register children outside mainstream education, partly to prevent religious abuse of children's rights.

In [response](#) to a consultation on elective home education in England the Department for Education (DfE) said it would consider legislation to create a register of children being home educated.

Education secretary Damian Hinds [said](#) the move would help councils to spot children who were receiving a solely religious education, attending unregistered schools or not receiving an education at all.

The NSS has lobbied education ministers and inspectors to urge them to take these issues seriously for many years.

The government said it would place a duty on local authorities to maintain a register of children of compulsory school age who do not attend school. Local authorities which responded to the consultation tended to be strongly in favour of a statutory system of registering children.

The register would apply to children who are not mainly receiving education in mainstream schools. It would not apply to children who are in mainstream schools but also receive supplementary education in out of school settings.

Parents would be required to inform their local authorities when children are not attending mainstream schools. The settings children attend would be required to respond to enquiries from local authorities about children's attendance.

There would be a duty on local authorities to provide support to home educating families, if it is requested by such families.

Writing in [The Telegraph](#) on Tuesday, Hinds said 'home education' had become "a catch-all phrase, used to refer to all children not in a registered school".

"While this does include those actually getting a really good education at home, it also includes children who are not getting an education at all, or being educated in illegal schools where they are vulnerable to dangerous influences.

"This register will provide a mechanism to catch those children who may 'fall through the cracks' of our education system by providing an immediate picture of where children are being educated, which will enable local authorities to offer support quickly and effectively if it is needed."

The NSS [campaigns](#) to protect children's rights against religious impositions and has played an important role in exposing the scandal of unregistered faith schools.

NSS education and schools officer Alastair Lichten welcomed the DfE's plans.

"Where there is evidence of EHE being abused or serving as a cover for illegal unregistered schools, these proposals will give local authorities the powers needed to intervene and protect children's rights. Registration is a necessary, reasonable and proportionate step.

"Good home educating families have nothing to worry about and many welcomed the additional support in these proposals during the consultation."

But he expressed disappointment that the plans would not include specific measures to define the suitability of home education or enable local authorities to monitor it.

A significant number of respondents called for greater clarity over what constitutes a "suitable" education. The NSS submitted research which showed that local authorities were taking almost no action against unsuitable home education or unregistered schools.

The DfE is now holding a further consultation over its plans for legislation.

Mr Lichten said: "We hope the next stage of the consultation will consider powers to monitor the suitability of home education where there are concerns, and outlining guidance for local authorities on what constitutes a suitable education.

"This need not be onerous, but without some common understanding children will slip through the cracks. Too many will end up in unregistered 'schools' that teach nothing but narrow religious curricula."

Last year the education inspectorate Ofsted [identified](#) 420 centres which it suspects are operating as illegal schools. Some of these are feared to be teaching a purely religious curriculum or exposing children to extreme views.

In its consultation response the DfE [estimated](#) that 57,600 children of compulsory school age in England were educated at home in 2018. It added that this figure may have increased by 20% over the previous 12 months, although this may be based on improved estimates.

It also said it had "probably" underestimated the true number, as councils do not know about all children who are out of school. Research has [suggested](#) that 93% of councils are not aware of all the children in their areas who are home educated.

The government held its consultation after [outlining](#) plans to register home educated children and issue school attendance orders for parents who refuse to comply last year.

In [response](#) to the previous consultation the NSS [said](#) registration would be a "minimal imposition" which would help to safeguard children's rights without unduly undermining home educating families' autonomy.

[A consultation on the proposals runs till 24 June 2019](#)

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[Update: The NSS has responded to the next stage of the consultation.](#)

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