



# Elective Home Education Survey 2021

November 2021

## Executive summary

Since 2016, ADCS has undertaken an annual elective home education (EHE) survey to capture the number and characteristics of children and young people who are known to be home educated. The survey also aims to understand the reasons behind a family's decision to electively home educate, how local authorities (LA) across the country are supporting these families, and how any available resources are being deployed in this area. This year's survey sought to capture the impact of Covid-19 across the 2020/21 academic year where schools experienced closures due to national lockdown and Covid outbreaks.

126 LAs responded to the 2021 survey, covering 83% of all local authorities in England. Based on the data received, we estimate that a total of **81,196** children and young people were being electively home educated on the first school census day, 7 October 2021. This is **an increase of 7%** from the same school census day in 2020 (1 October). During the 2020/21 academic year, we estimate that the total cumulative number of children and young people being home educated was **115,542**. This represents **a 34% increase** since the 2019/20 academic year. Further, it is estimated that almost half (49.8%) of this cohort became EHE during the 2020/21 academic year, suggesting that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the number of children and young people that are currently electively home educated

Feedback from responding LAs highlighted the high level of 'churn' within the EHE population over the past academic year with September 2020 and March 2021 (when schools fully re-opened) reported as peak months for EHE notifications. Health concerns relating to Covid-19 remained the most common reason for parents choosing to electively home educate their child/ren, however, this year's survey saw a significant increase in the number of parents citing health or emotional health reasons. LAs reported anxiety and mental health needs of children and young people as an increasingly common factor in parental decisions to electively home educate.

Prior to the pandemic, the EHE population was growing by approximately 20% each year for the past five years as previous ADCS EHE surveys have shown. Over the course of the pandemic, the number of children who are EHE has increased significantly, however, the numbers fluctuated throughout the previous year as some children returned to school. LAs have consistently highlighted the fact that they cannot be certain of the true size of this cohort given that there is no statutory register of EHE children and young people.

LAs have a duty to establish whether a suitable education is being provided but do not have a role in the assurance of this. Survey responses show that LAs remain very concerned about the lack of powers available to them to ensure that all EHE children are safeguarded and receiving a suitable education. Every child has the right to a high-quality education in a safe learning environment but without powers to see both the child and their place of learning, we cannot know that these children are safe from harm or exploitation. LAs can only safeguard children who are known to them and without a mandatory register, there is no way of knowing the full extent of the size this cohort. ADCS awaits the outcome of the Department for Education's 2019 consultation *Children not in school* which proposed duties on LAs to maintain a register of children who are electively home educated and to provide support to parents who educate their children at home. ADCS is clear that the government must fully fund these duties, especially given the dramatic increase in the size of the elective home education cohort.

# Summary analysis of the ADCS Elective Home Education Survey 2021

## Key findings

- During the whole of the last academic year (2020/21) 94,258 were known to be EHE across 124 responding LAs. Therefore, an estimated cumulative total of **115,542** children and young people were being home educated across all 152 LAs in England during the previous academic year. This represents an increase of approximately **34%** from the 2019/20 academic year
- Between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021 there were an estimated **57,500** notifications for children and young people to become electively home educated. This represents almost half of the cumulative total of EHE children and young people across the 2020/21 academic year
- On school census day, 7 October 2021, a total of 67,308 children and young people were known to be electively home educated (EHE) across 126 responding LAs. It is therefore estimated that **81,196** children and young people were EHE across all 152 LAs in England. This represents an increase of approximately **7%** from the same school census day in 2020 (1 October)
- The most common reason cited by parents for home educating their child/ren was due to health reasons directly related to Covid-19 followed by health/emotional health reasons.

## 1. Background

Since 2016, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has issued a survey to all 152 local authorities (LAs) in England on elective home education (EHE). The aim of the survey is to capture the number and characteristics of children and young people who are known to be electively home educated, the reasons behind a family's decision to home educate, to understand how LAs across the country are supporting these families, and how available resources are being deployed in this service area. The number of children and young people who are electively home educated is not currently captured via a statutory national data return.

This year's survey also aimed to capture the impact of Covid-19 on the number of EHE children and young people across the 2020/21 academic year. As with previous surveys, we also gathered a snapshot of the size of this cohort on the first school census day of the current academic year, 7 October 2021. EHE remains an important topic of national interest, both in the media and national government. In July 2021 The House of Commons Education Committee published its follow-up report on EHE *Strengthening Home Education* which made a number of recommendations to government, including a statutory register of children outside of school and a clearer definition of a 'suitable' education.

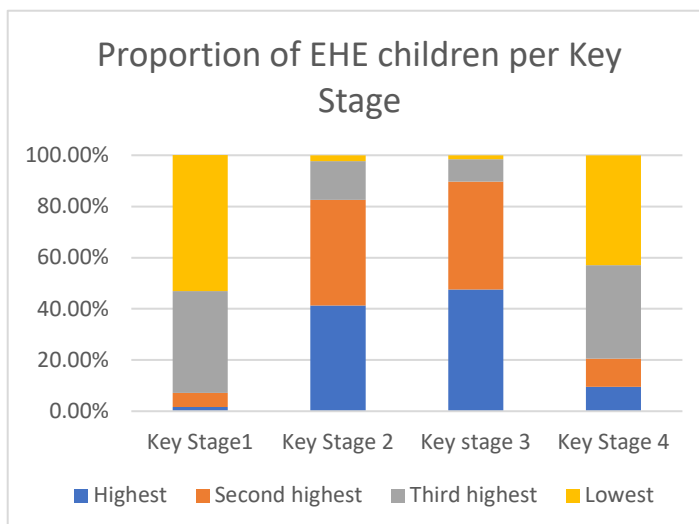
## 2. Understanding the cohort

### 2.1 Total number of children known to be electively home educated on Thursday 7 October 2021

Across the 126 responding LAs, a total of 67,308 children and young people were known to be electively home educated on 7 October 2021, the first school census day of the 2021/22 academic year. It can therefore be estimated that there were 81,196 children and young people across all 152 LAs being electively home educated on this date. This represents an increase of 7% from school

census day on 1 October 2020. The largest reported cohort in a single LA was 3,121 and the mean average across all 126 responding LAs was 534, similar to the average on 1 October 2020.

LAs were asked to rank Key Stages 1 – 4, from highest to lowest, by the number of EHE children and young people within each Key Stage. Key Stage 3 was selected most often as having the highest and second highest number of EHE children which reflects previous surveys. Key Stage 2 was ranked first and second by a similar number of LAs, whilst Key Stages 1 and 4 were most likely to have the smallest EHE population. Data from our 2020 survey found that the Key Stage 4 age group accounted for approximately 27% of the EHE population, suggesting that there has been a significant



drop in numbers. However, it is difficult to make direct comparisons with last year's data where LAs were not asked to rank Key Stage but instead provided the overall number for each Key Stage.

*“The number of parents choosing EHE has stabilised after a sustained period of higher numbers of parents withdrawing their children from school due to the pandemic. These have related to either Covid-19 anxiety or health conditions that parents say make families more vulnerable to infection...The cohort is also getting younger with more referrals from Key Stage 2.”*

*“There were a high number of children removed between September and October 2020 due to concerns with Covid. There were also a number of children removed at this time as parents felt they had engaged better with education during lockdowns and were less anxious at home. In September 2021 there has been a number of young people leave schools due to anxiety/mental health needs.”*

*“Worryingly, many of the notifications received since September 2021 have been for families with multiple layers of vulnerability where EHE does not seem the most appropriate route for the children concerned. In many cases practitioners have worked with families and other services to ensure children remain in school but this hasn't always been possible. Without stronger legislation and powers to safeguard the welfare of children who are EHE, this concerning trend will no doubt continue.”*

## 2.2 Cumulative total of EHE children and young people in 2020/21

As with previous surveys, LAs were asked to provide the cumulative total of children and young people known to be electively home educated at any point during the 2020/21 academic year. 124 LAs responded to this question reporting a combined total of 94,258. It is therefore estimated that 115,542 children and young people were being electively home educated nationally at some point during the 2020/21 academic year; an increase of 34% since the 2019/20 academic year.

Feedback from respondents showed that the impact of Covid-19 was still a common factor in parents choosing to home educate their children. This was particularly evident in the noticeable concentration of notifications for EHE in September 2020 and March 2021 when schools fully re-opened. The [ADCS EHE survey 2020](#) found that of those who were EHE on 1 October 2020, approximately 25% had become EHE during the month of September alone. Respondents in this year's survey reiterated that there was a higher than usual peak during the months of September

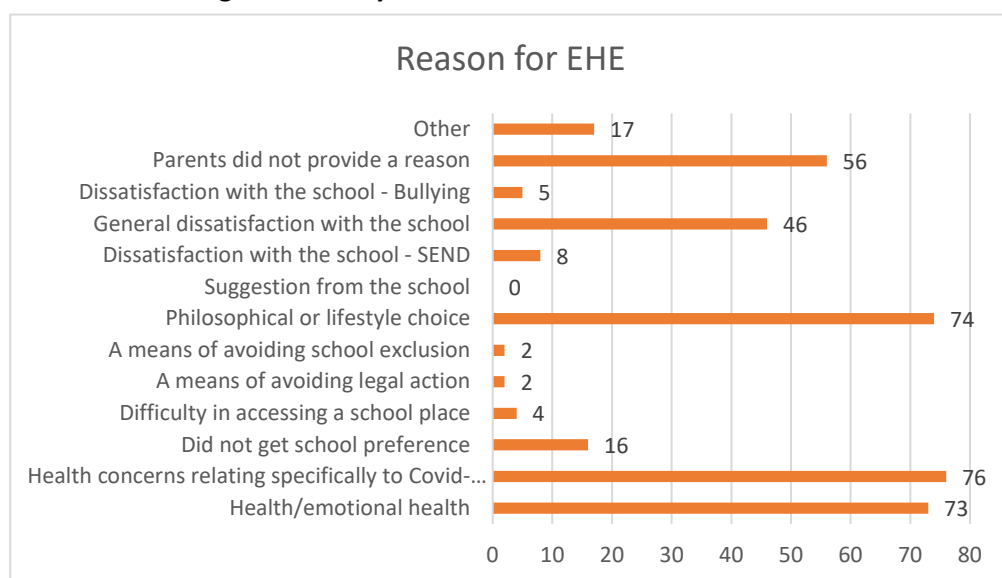
and October 2020 in the number of new notifications for EHE. However, many respondents highlighted the significant ‘churn’ throughout the 2020/21 academic year with high numbers of children and young people both returning to school and being removed from school to become electively home educated.

This year, respondents were asked to provide the number of formal notifications made for EHE between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021 which totalled 46,968 across the 124 responding LAs. This represents 49.8% of the cumulative total of EHE children and young people across the 2020/21 academic year.

LAs were asked to break down the number of formal requests for EHE from mainstream schools and special schools with 117 LAs providing data for both types of school. 36,626 children were known to have become EHE from mainstream schools across the last academic year and 332 children from special schools.

### 2.3 Most common reason for choosing to electively home educate

LAs were asked to select the top three reasons provided by parents or carers locally for choosing to home educate their children on school census day. 125 LAs responded to this question and “health concerns relating specifically to Covid-19” was cited most frequently, followed closely by “philosophical or lifestyle choice” and “health/emotional



health.” These findings largely reflect last year’s, however, “health/emotional health” was cited far more often than previous years. Respondents commonly noted the prevalence of anxiety and mental health issues experienced by children and young people during the pandemic as a factor. When schools fully re-opened in September 2020, the number rose dramatically. LAs attributed this to the concerns of parents over the health of their child/ren associated with Covid-19, however, the positive experience that parents had during the partial closure of schools was also cited, albeit less frequently.

*“There have been significant increases in the number of EHE notifications with the main reason given as mental health & anxiety. Due to the disruption in terms of attending school as a result of the pandemic, lock-downs and ‘bubble’ closures across all key stages; this resulted in parents reporting that children did not want to return back to school.”*

*“There has been a significant increase in the number of parents/carers electing to home educate children across the borough. There are a number of reasons for this, mostly attributable directly or indirectly to Covid, including parental anxiety about a child in a school setting, an increase in parents working from home or temporarily not working, and parents reporting an improvement in their child’s mental health outside of a mainstream school setting.”*

*“We are seeing a number of children moving to EHE for temporary periods due to pending house moves to go out of the area.”*

### **3. Safeguarding, welfare and special educational needs**

#### **3.1 Special educational needs**

As in previous surveys, LAs were asked for the percentage of children and young people who are home educated and have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) on 7 October 2021. 125 LAs responded and 98 (78%) reported that between 0 - 5% had an EHCP and 27 (22%) reported that between 6 – 10% of this cohort had an EHCP. These figures largely reflect responses from previous surveys, however, some respondents noted that they have seen a noticeable increase in children who are EHE with an EHCP or requiring SEN support.

#### **3.2 Size of the elective home education cohort known to children’s social care and/or wider children’s services**

LAs were asked to provide the percentage of their EHE cohort that is known to **children’s social care**, both historical and current.

124 LAs provided data on EHE children known *currently* to children’s social care with 118 LAs (95%) reporting that this is between 0 - 5%, however, one LA reported the proportion as between 20 – 25%.

114 LAs provided data on EHE children known to children’s social care (historic) with 67 LAs (59%) reporting that this is between 0 - 5% and 18 LAs (16%) reporting it to be between 6-10%. 14 LAs (12%) reported that more than 25% of their EHE cohort were known (historic) to children’s social care.

Last year’s 2020 EHE survey reported the mean average percentage of EHE children known to children’s social care, historic and/or current, as 9%. However, it should be noted that this year’s survey is the first to provide separate figures for the percentage of children known to children’s social care historically and the percentage currently known to children’s social care.

LAs were also asked to provide the percentage of their EHE cohort known to **wider children’s services**, both historic and current.

114 LAs provided data on children *currently* known to wider children’s services with 94 LAs (90%) reporting this to be between 0 - 5% of their EHE cohort. 9 LAs (8%) reported it to be between 6 – 10% and 6 LAs (5%) reported it to be between 11 – 15%.

106 LAs provided data on children known to wider children’s services (historic) with 47 LAs (44%) reporting this to be between 0 - 5%, 15 LAs (14%) reporting it to be between 6 – 10% and 16 LAs (15%) reporting it to be more than 25%. Last year’s 2020 survey found that the mean average percentage of EHE children known to wider children’s services, historic and/or current, was 14%.

#### **3.3 Children missing education**

LAs were asked whether they record EHE children and young people identified as not receiving a suitable education as children missing education (CME). Of the 125 respondents, 64 (51.2%) said that they did *not* report this as CME whereas 61 (48.8%) said that those children are recorded as CME. Of those reporting that they do not record EHE children not receiving a suitable education as CME, many said that they initiate a School Attendance Order (SAO) process instead. Other responding LAs noted that a child is only recorded as CME once the parents have expressed that

they are not providing an education for their child/ren at home and wish to find a school. The highest reported number of EHE children not receiving a suitable education and reported as CME within an LA was 290.

### 3.4 Use of unregistered/ illegal schools

LAs were asked if they were aware of any unregistered or illegal schools operating in their area. The vast majority of responding LAs were not aware of this happening in their area, however, where LAs suggested that where they are aware of unregistered or illegal schools they are quick to notify Ofsted of their concerns.

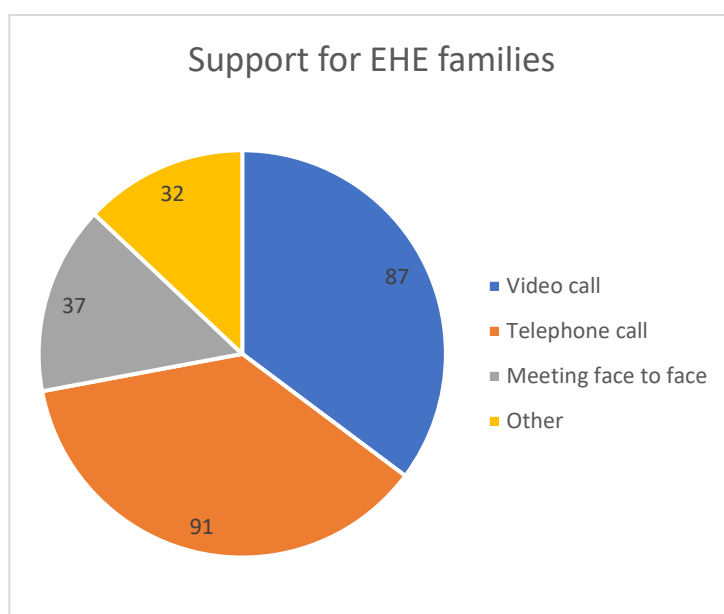
*“Parents are advised of the importance of carrying out thorough checks on any organisation working with their children and given copies of a guidance booklet with suggested questions to ask to ensure that their child will be safe.”*

## 4. Support for electively home educated children and their families

### 4.1 Offer of support

LAs were asked what support was offered to children and families who are electively home educated. 117 respondents indicated which of the following they offered: a video call, telephone call, or face to face meeting. Telephone and video calls were by far most common ways of offering support.

Of those who selected “other”, support offers include the use of social media and email to keep EHE families updated on national guidance or educational support available during the pandemic. Some LAs continued to utilise EHE parent network groups or hubs to maintain engagement.



### 4.2 Exam centres

115 LAs responded to our question on how many schools/education settings within their area offer to host external candidates for exams. 51% of respondents did not know of education settings in their area who do so. Of those LAs aware of education settings offering to host external candidates, there were an average of 2.6 education settings per LA offering this service.

LAs were also asked how many other settings in their area host external candidates e.g. exam centres. Of the 114 respondents, 70% did not know of this offer existing within their local area. Of the 33 LAs that were aware of this offer within their area, an average of 2 settings per LA were providing this service.

### 4.3 National guidance

This year, LAs were asked whether current national guidance for LAs on elective home education is clear. 98 LAs responded that it is not clear:

*“The Guidance for Parents continues to state that they do not have to respond to informal enquiries. There is also insufficient guidance regarding key aspects of parental provision; parents have no basic duties regarding the number of hours expected for the delivery of a full-time education or guidance on what this should look like where learning is developed autonomously. Other than an expectation regarding English, there is no direction regarding the content or quality of education, the need for assessment and no consideration regarding the impact of parental capacity. The duty on LAs to confirm children are receiving a suitable education is challenging with no ongoing access to parental provision or children’s work.”*

*“Whilst guidance is improved, what constitutes a suitable and efficient education remains open to individual interpretation and challenge which presents challenges for LAs in their working relationship with parents. This means that time is spent on costly and combative legal action should there be disagreement rather than a shared understanding of what is suitable and efficient.”*

*“The guidelines are inconsistent. Parents take on the responsibility to educate their children but any involvement with the LA is completely voluntary. However, the LA is required to ensure that all children are receiving a suitable education and are safeguarded. The LA guidelines say that if no evidence is produced that the LA can assume no education is taking place, but as parental engagement is voluntary, they can legally refuse to provide such evidence. This is a large area of conflict.”*

## 5. Resources

### 5.1 Budget and actual spend

As in previous surveys, LAs were asked to provide their budget for supporting the coordination and provision of EHE for the 2020/21 academic year. 113 LAs provided their budget and actual spend:

**Average budget on coordination of home education: £46,000**

**Average overall spend on coordination of home education: £86,211**

Budgets ranged from £5,000 - £350,000. 43% of responding LAs reported an in-year overspend in their budget, 16% reported an underspend and the remaining 41% reported no difference in their budget and actual spend. These findings mark an increase from last year’s survey on the proportion of LAs reporting an overspend, with only 18% of responding LAs reporting an overspend in 2020.

Some LAs reported that they either did not have a dedicated budget or could not specify the budget allocation, possibly because these services operated in a wider context.

### 5.2 Number of full time equivalent (FTE) staff

123 LAs provided an answer to this question and reported an overall average of 2.2 FTE members of staff per LA to co-ordinate and monitor EHE provision, similar to the average reported in 2020. Generally, staff in this area have wider responsibilities within the LA, not just EHE. Further, due to demand pressures put on EHE teams over the past year, some LAs have drawn in more members of staff to help with the increased number of EHE referrals being received.



## **Additional comments**

*“There is a huge loophole in EHE national policy which makes the existing policy unsafe. There needs to be a statutory duty implemented to ensure our children who are home educated are learning, have regular home visits (that are statutory, not parental option) so the child is seen and to observe the work taking place.”*

*“There is a very clear national policy regarding expectations and outcomes for children educated within school; similar consideration has not been given to children educated at home.”*

*“Unfortunately, both legislation and statutory guidance is both non-specific and open to interpretation. This is true for local authorities interpreting guidance differently, but more importantly, interpreted differently by parents and the courts regarding what LAs can reasonably do to carry out their duties. This is highlighted by the fact that there is currently no legal definition of efficient full-time education or what is deemed to be suitable.”*

*“Since the reopening of schools in September 2020, and then March 2021, a rapid surge in parents opting to home educate has occurred. This has led to us widening our reach to include Education Welfare Officers and School Attendance Officers, all working collaboratively and proactively to engage children back into education, whilst assuring families that children are being safeguarded via robust risk assessments when returning to school.”*

*“We are seeing more families refusing to engage and quoting parental guidance regarding rights to educate their child and a lack of powers for LAs to enforce cooperation and information sharing to meet their statutory duty. A register would help identify families but would need to come with clear guidance regarding engaging and cooperating with agencies.”*

*“We are struggling to recruit admin support for our EHE officer, and do not have any budget to employ further EHE officers. Covid 19 continues to have a big impact on EHE numbers. If the government wishes to impose extra requirements on LAs they must provide the funding to implement these.”*

*“There is currently no regulatory oversight of alternative provisions, tutors, unregistered settings or home education groups that operate under 18 hours a week or where they claim that they do not provide all or substantially all of a child’s education. This is a growing safeguarding concern and one that we take very seriously.”*

*“The role of the EHE Support Officer has been invaluable in having oversight of the whole EHE cohort. This has enabled EHE Officers to focus on ensuring parents are provided with accurate information, support and guidance to ensure their children are educated but also ensures a focus is made on cases where no or little response has been received.”*

*“Only being able to allocate an SAO to schools where places are available means that schools are often reluctant to take a child as they are already receiving above average numbers of potentially more complex cases.”*

*“There are only a limited number of local colleges who offer and apply for the EHE funding for the relevant courses for 14-16 provision. Therefore, spaces and options are limited for EHE families to access this type of provision.”*

*“We would welcome clearer guidance on access to examinations and post 16 opportunities. As a local authority we continue to provide a package of support above and beyond the minimum requirement, however this is costly.”*

## The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS)

ADCS is the national leadership  
association in England for statutory  
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their senior management teams



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