REVIEW

Flexi-schooling children with special educational needs and disabilities in the UK

January 2022

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20/20health
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Relationships Foundation

Foreword

A cursory glance at the statistics tells us that education is failing too many children with SEND. Nearly half of all exclusions and double the rate of bullying are experienced by children with SEND, yet they constitute only 15% of the school population. Similarly, children with neurodiverse traits such as ADHD or autism are at far higher risk of missing out on school, whether through exclusion or so-called 'school refusal'.

For some years senior educators and school leaders have been calling for mainstream school reform, which makes this review timely in highlighting the needs of some of our most vulnerable children. Without national guidelines or an understanding of the value of flexi-schooling, the predominant all-or-nothing approach denies families the crucial support and flexibility that their children need in order to thrive in education. This can also be true for children without SEND. And from what evidence there is, we know that schools offering flexibility do not lose out and children can feel more, not less, included.

The recommendations called for in this review would initiate a response to many children's needs for flexibility in SEND interventions. They resonate with the ambitions of educators and policy-makers of creating a personalised curriculum. But there are significant gaps in the research which need to be explored so that, as previous ambitions have stated, no child is left behind. It is our hope that this report catalyses immediate action so more families have access to flexi-schooling arrangements from the moment their children need them. If as a society we are serious about lifelong education and equity, we need to ensure that we enable all children to enjoy their school years. Flexi-schooling could be the game-changer to enable this for a significant number of children.

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January 2022

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Summary

This review examines the flexi-schooling landscape in the UK and investigates whether the arrangement can bring benefit to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Flexi-schooling is an arrangement where a child is registered at school but attends only part of the time; the rest of the time the child is home-educated (DCSF, 2007). In England and Wales, flexi-schooling arrangements can only be made at the request of a parent or carer with parental responsibility, and in most cases, head-teachers alone hold the authority to accept or reject a request. The school receives full funding for any flexi-schooled child on its roll and remains responsible for educational outcomes.

Academic evidence on flexi-schooling in the UK and internationally is very limited, with little in the way of monitoring and outcomes reporting — even in the US, where it is estimated that more than one million children are flexi-schooled.

Flexi-schooling appears to be on the increase in the UK, particularly in Scotland, but remains rare, with pupil numbers likely to be in the low thousands only. Low incidence links in part to parents' lack of legal right to insist on a flexi-schooling arrangement, unlike their legal right to home-educate. It may also link to confusion around the circumstances of flexi-schooling. The Department for Education (DfE) has issued its principal guidance through elective home education publications and implied that flexi-schooling is typically sought by home educators who require an element of formal schooling to 'ensure the provision in specific subjects is satisfactory' (DfE 2019a). This is but one scenario; the DfE does not describe situations where a child already enrolled in school is granted a flexi-schooling arrangement and where learning is predominantly school-based.

Local Authorities are variously supportive, neutral or discouraging of flexi-schooling, while a great many schools and trusts do not permit flexi-schooling and have no experience of the arrangement.

There is however a growing number of schools and trusts in the UK that consider or welcome flexi-schooling applications. Some rural schools have offered these arrangements to home educating families to boost pupil numbers and remain viable; other schools consider applications on an individual basis and in some cases have agreed the majority of flexi-schooling arrangements for children with SEND.

Children with SEND represent a priority category for flexi-schooling consideration because of their permanent disadvantage. For many, this links to speech, language and communication difficulties; learning difficulties; social, emotional and mental health needs; and sensory challenges. When a parent or carer of a child with SEND requests a flexi-schooling arrangement, they typically seek a *SEND intervention* out of concern for their child's wellbeing, mental health and safety. This is additional to (not in place of) 'reasonable adjustments' the school should make within the school environment itself to meet need, as stipulated under UK law (Equality Act 2010).

Many parents of children with SEND are denied flexi-schooling arrangements. Head-teachers may harbour concerns about the complexity of the arrangement, safeguarding, and effect on attendance records and test results. They may also hold a belief that flexi-schooling denies the child access to opportunities within the school and is fundamentally oppositional to their inclusion policy. However, it is notable that Ofsted, having inspected schools with significant numbers of flexi-schooled pupils, has issued largely positive statements concerning the arrangements. This review examined multiple Ofsted reports of such schools and found no negative comment on code C flexi-schooling absences, safeguarding, test results or inclusion issues.

It is also important to note that with no repository of studies comparing outcomes across full-time attending and flexi-schooled pupils, there can be no claim that full-time school attendance, with 'reasonable adjustments', offers all children with SEND *optimal opportunities* for educational, developmental and wellbeing outcomes.

Evidence we do have, however, shows the mainstream schooling system is failing to meet the needs of a great number of children with SEND. Consider the following:

- Pupils with identified SEN account for nearly half of all permanent exclusions and fixed period exclusions (DfE, 2018).
- Children with ADHD have more than 100 times greater risk of being permanently excluded from school than other children (O'Regan 2009).
- In a UK study, persistent non-attendance was found among 43% of autistic pupils, with so-called 'school refusal' the most common reason for absence (Totsika et al 2020).
- Only 25% of autistic children claim to feel happy or included in school (NAS, 2021a).
- Pupils with a statement of SEN or an EHCP have an overall school absence rate twice that of those with no identified SEN (DfE 2019b).
- Children with SEND are twice as likely as other children to be bullied regularly (Mencap n.d.).

Ofsted has highlighted 'significant weaknesses' in the SEND system, including gaps in external provision and training, a lack of coordination between services, and weak co-production (Ofsted 2021). The inspectorate has at the same time noted an increasing and disproportionate number of children with SEND being removed from schools by their parents to be home educated (Ofsted 2019; also Whittaker & Belger, 2021). Many parents report opting for home education only out of desperation; some would have preferred flexi-schooling but found the school unwilling to accommodate the arrangement (Parsons & Lewis 2010; Smith et al 2020).

Evidence also suggests that even with appropriate SEND support, some children will forever struggle to cope with the full-time school environment (Lawrence 2012; Fife Council 2014). With sensory, communication and learning challenges in combination with complex social, emotional and mental health needs, some neurodiverse children may be simply overwhelmed by the unrelenting demands, pressures and challenges of full-time school. Such children do not have the same adaptive capacities as 'neurotypical' children and need much more down-time and alone-time in 'safe spaces'. Parents may see flexi-schooling as a way of enabling a more manageable timetable and routine, because for many neurodiverse children, the only safe space in which to properly decompress and recharge is the home.

It is clear from the Flexischooling Families UK Facebook group, with membership of around 10,000, that parents of children with diagnosed or suspected SEND often pursue flexi-schooling arrangements pre-emptively, requesting assurances of the arrangement prior to their child's enrolment at school. Many have evidence of their child's SEND and social-emotional challenges from pre-school experience; with the prospect of increased hours and demands at primary school, they are already very mindful of increased risks to their child's wellbeing. Requests are frequently refused.

Further, where challenging behaviour and meltdowns (loss of behavioural control) follow school-based SEND interventions, or where these occur primarily at home at the end of the school day, schools are liable to believe the problem lies with parenting or the home environment (Eaton 2016). Such assumptions often underscore a lack of understanding of neurodiversity and represent a refusal to consider that full-time school attendance itself may be presenting the greatest barrier of all to a child's social-emotional wellbeing.

Head-teachers need to consider whether granting a flexi-schooling arrangement for a child with known or suspected SEND may enable a less stressful and more manageable routine, better educational and behavioural outcomes, and — perhaps counter-intuitively — stronger inclusion. In some cases, the intervention may in turn create a more positive learning environment for the child's peers.

As mentioned above, flexi-schooling is much more common in the US than in the UK. There it is estimated that more than a quarter of a million children with special educational needs and disabilities are flexi-schooled, or 'part-time enrolled'. In rural areas, one in four flexi-schooled children has ADHD; across rural and urban schools, autism is two to four times more prevalent among flexi-schoolers than in the full-time enrolled and home-schooled populations. Orthopaedic, learning, and serious emotional disabilities all see significantly higher prevalence among flexi-schoolers overall. And far from flexi-schooling being the preserve of wealthy families, flexi-schooling families are on balance *less affluent* than those with full-time enrolled children and notably less so than full-time home-schooling families (Schafer and Khan 2017).

Risks in flexi-schooling of course need to be carefully considered. Ofsted has not raised many (if any) concerns in relation to arrangements involving pre-set flexi-day options, but arrangements are more complex where timetables are personalised according to the special educational needs of a child. For example, a child may attend on alternate days, or during mornings only, even for just two hours. This may have implications for administration and teaching staff workloads, depending on support arrangements for parents (or carers) as home-educators. A small study of flexi-schooling families in Fife noted several other risks, relating to problems in family and school communications, adherence to timetables, keeping up with schoolwork and access to resources (Robertson & McHardy 2020). It concluded that stronger lines of communication, clearer timetabling responsibilities and third-sector involvement could all support stronger learning outcomes.

Under UK law, the national curriculum does not apply to the non-school-based part of flexi-schooling, nor is there any stipulation in law of the number of hours per week implied by 'full-time education'. Some, perhaps many, parents of children with SEND value flexi-days as

essential down-time for their child and make few educational demands. Others may seek opportunities for child-led learning, allowing and supporting their child to choose their own learning activities based on specific interests. Child-led learning may extend to outdoor activities, such as forest school, or visits to museums and historical sites. Some parents may choose a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to education, or they may use flexi-days to focus on specific aspects of the national or school's own curriculum.

Parents may also use flexi-days for soft skills development and positive reinforcement, building their child's motivations, self-esteem, self-confidence, values and good behaviours, all of which may be challenged by high levels of stress and anxiety within the school environment.

Parent-reported flexi-schooling outcomes have included happier children, better school access, lower levels of anxiety and fewer meltdowns (Lawrence 2018; DGPSG 2019). The COVID-19 school closures in 2020 brought some evidence of this. Aberdeenshire council, recording an increase in flexi-schooling requests subsequently, reported that while many parents had found home education challenging and struggled with a lack of support, some reported benefits of 'greater opportunities for quality parent-child time…and lower levels of anxiety amongst some children who find the school environment overwhelming' (Aberdeenshire Council, 2020a).

Schools should be encouraged not to dismiss SEND flexi-schooling requests on the basis of having never previously arranged them, or out of concern for attendance figures and test results. There is mounting evidence that the full-time school environment, even with appropriate adjustments, can be overwhelming for some children with SEND. Some neurodiverse children, crippled by stress and anxiety, even trauma, lack capacity to attend school; at worst, they experience multiple exclusions for behavioural problems. Failure to meet needs appropriately not only undermines the child's education and development, it can also place enormous stress on family functioning and puts the child at high risk of poor outcomes in adulthood (European Commission 2013; Gill et al 2017).

It is widely accepted that SEND interventions should begin as early as possible (DfE 2015). It would therefore be wrong to think of flexi-schooling simply as a last-resort option. Many parents will make requests based on their child's lived experience, and with considerable thought and commitment, with the aim of protecting their child's emotional well-being and mental health. The success of flexi-schooling arrangements appears to rest largely on mutual clarity and understanding between schools and parents on roles and expectations.

Flexi-schooling may not be appropriate in each child's case, and it may only occasionally be requested by parents, but there needs to be greater awareness among schools, trusts and Local Authorities as to the potential benefits of flexi-schooling, and proper consideration of this 'co-production' arrangement as an early and pupil-centred SEND intervention.

Recommendations

1. **Department for Education to issue comprehensive guidelines on flexi-schooling arrangements in its national guidance for schools.**

   Current DfE flexi-schooling guidelines are misleading. The DfE has issued its principal guidance in Elective Home Education (EHE) publications and describes the arrangement from the starting point of EHE, and with reference to children who remain mostly home educated. The Department does not describe situations where (1) a child enrolled in school is granted a flexi-schooling arrangement; (2) a child's learning is predominantly school-based; or (3) a child transitions from part-time school attendance in reception to a formal flexi-schooling arrangement on reaching compulsory school age.

2. **Department for Education to introduce a new attendance code for flexi-schooling.**

   The DfE has not issued an absence code that fully reflects the arrangement of flexi-schooling, and many schools may mistakenly believe that the use of 'code C' (authorised absence) for flexi-schooling would be viewed negatively by Ofsted. Current DfE guidance is potentially undermining schools' willingness to serve the best interests of all children with SEND.

3. **Government, UKRI and other institutional funders to support academic study of flexi-schooling children with SEND.**

   A stronger body of evidence on SEND flexi-schooling, examining parent motivations, best practice and outcomes, is needed to inform policy at the national and local level, and in turn reduce inequalities of access in the UK.

4. **Multi-agency consortium to produce national guidelines on flexi-schooling children with SEND.**

   Many Local Authorities, schools and parents would benefit from accessible guidelines informed and endorsed by national SEND charities, academic experts, schools and people with lived experience. Guidelines should aim to give both parents and schools confidence in flexi-schooling decision-making and planning.

   The Relationships Foundation (RF) has already received expressions of interest of support from national charities and experts in neurodiversity, disability and education to undertake this work. RF is seeking funding and further partners to i) create interim guidelines from research undertaken to date; ii) create a more robust body of evidence to inform Local Authorities and schools; and iii) capture evidence of practices and relationships that are enabling children with SEND to thrive.

1. Purpose of this review

This review examines flexi-schooling (or 'part-time school attendance') regulation and practice in the UK, with the primary aim of understanding whether such arrangements may be beneficial to children who have, or may have, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

A restricted focus on SEND is not to imply that flexi-schooling may not be beneficial to children without such needs. For example, children experiencing developmental delay may benefit from a period of flexi-schooling to facilitate their introduction to full-time formal education.[a] Others may be granted longer-term flexible attendance to pursue special talents, for example in sport or the arts, or to explore their heritage and mix with others who speak their mother tongue. Some parents may wish to flexi-school to expand their child's learning opportunities or simply achieve more quality parent–child time, while home educating families may want to shift to flexi-schooling to ensure appropriate provision in specific subjects (Humphreys et al. 2018; DfE 2019a).

Children with SEND, however, represent a different category altogether because of their permanent disadvantage. For many, this is linked to speech, language and communication difficulties; learning difficulties; social, emotional and mental health needs, and sensory challenges. The permanency of SEND implies that flexi-schooling may need to be considered as a long-term approach across both primary and secondary school years, though subject to regular review.

It is important to state that no studies, experts or even advocates consulted during this review recommended flexi-schooling for all or even most children with SEND. That flexi-schooling may be an approach only for the minority should not deter its investigation and full consideration.

NOTE: The terms 'SEND' and 'SEN' are both used in this report. While 'SEND' is the preferred term owing to frequent overlap between special educational needs and disability, 'SEN' is used where referenced literature uses this term specifically. The near-equivalent term for SEND in Scotland is Additional Support Needs (ASN) and in Wales, Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Both ASN and ALN are wide in scope, extending beyond SEND to identify other pupils who require short or long-term additional learning support.

Review methodology

This scoping review was undertaken between July and December 2021. A rapid review process was used to source evidence on flexi-schooling in the UK, primarily using Google Scholar, Springer Link, Wiley and UK Government databases; relevant literature was also accessed via MEDLINE and Embase. Due to a very slim evidence base on flexi-schooling in the UK, research was supported by 47 freedom of information requests (FOIs) for further insights and data, the majority (32) sent to Local Authorities in England and Wales, and (13) to multi-academy trusts in England. Several interviews were undertaken with experts and national charities to help steer research and understand challenges and opportunities in flexi-schooling arrangements for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Insights were also obtained from interviews, online closed groups and discussion forums, blogs and testimonials.

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[a] Summer-born children may also benefit from initial part-time school attendance to facilitate their introduction to full-time school attendance. However, the arrangement for a child under compulsory school age is a parental right and not formal 'flexi-schooling'. The child is of compulsory school age on the first day of the term following their fifth birthday.

2. Introduction

> *"Flexi-schooling" or "flexible school attendance" is an arrangement between the parent and the school where the child is registered at school and attends the school only part of the time; the rest of the time the child is home-educated.*
>
> DCSF, 2007.

Flexi-schooling, or 'part-time school attendance', is legal in the UK if the arrangement is requested by a parent or carer and agreed to by the head teacher. In some cases, the Local Authority or school board may also be involved in considering flexi-schooling requests. Unlike parents' legal right to electively home-educate, there is no legal right to insist schools accept flexi-school arrangements.

Flexi-schooling is distinct from a 'reduced timetable' (or 'part-time timetable'), which is a short-term measure intended to enable re-integration to full-time attendance. Reduced timetables may be useful for pupils with a temporary disability or medical condition that prevents full-time attendance, or for children who have experienced traumatic events, such as the death of a family member.[b]

The number of flexi-schooled children in the UK is unknown, but as later described, there is reason to believe the figure for maintained schools may be in the low thousands only, out of a school-aged population of nearly 10 million. This would imply flexi-schooling to be much less common than elective home education, given evidence of around 58,000 home-educated children in England alone in 2018 (ADCS 2018).[c]

In the USA, by contrast, it is estimated that more than one million children — just above 2% (1 in 50) of the school-aged population — are flexi-schooled. Such arrangements in the US appear slightly more common than homeschooling, especially so amongst children with disabilities (Schafer and Khan 2017).

The primary focus of this review is to examine flexi-schooling arrangements in relation to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). In much of the UK, a special educational need implies a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made. A child or young person has a learning difficulty or disability if they have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or a disability that prevents or hinders them from making use of general facilities (DfE 2015).

References to SEND in this report should be understood as including children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or a statement of SEN; children on SEN support; and children without formal support who show signs of neurodiversity or learning difficulties.

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[b] Schools can instigate a reduced timetable, but only with parental agreement. For more information see (in references): Oxfordshire County Council 2018; also https://sendadvicesurrey.org.uk/part-time-timetables-2/

[c] Home-education saw an unprecedented rise in 2020, following the lifting of COVID-19 lockdown, with estimates having risen to around 76,000 pupils, a 38% increase on 2019. It is clear that at least some of this rise can be attributed to parental health concerns over COVID-19. See references: ADCS 2020.

In England in 2019, 271,200 pupils (3.1%) of the total pupil population had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and a further 1,047,200 pupils (11.9%) were on SEN support. Thus around 15% of all school-age pupils have a recognised special educational need (DfE 2019c).

The most common primary type of need registered under EHCPs was Autism (29%), while for SEN it was Speech, Language and Communication needs (23%), followed by Moderate Learning Difficulty (22.8%), and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (18.1%) (DfE 2019c).

Schools and education authorities have a statutory duty to provide 'reasonable adjustments' to meet the needs of pupils with disabilities so they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with those who are not disabled (Equality Act 2010). It is important to acknowledge the outstanding work some mainstream schools in the UK undertake in support of SEND — facilitating assessments, planning support, implementing support strategies and keeping these under regular review (for example, Skipp & Hopwood, 2017). Many special schools, also, boast a strong record and have seen increasing pupil populations (Roberts, 2019), although less than 10% of children with SEND are educated in such schools (DfE 2021).

In many cases, however, schools are under-resourced or lack staff with appropriate skills and training in SEND. A recent Ofsted review highlighted 'significant weaknesses' in the SEND system generally, including gaps in external provision and training, a lack of coordination between services, and weak co-production (Ofsted 2021a).

The challenges faced by children with SEND in the school environment are well evidenced:

- Pupils with identified special educational needs accounted for nearly half of all permanent exclusions and fixed period exclusions (46.7% per cent and 44.9% respectively) in 2016–17 (DfE 2018).
- Children with ADHD have more than 100 times greater risk of being permanently excluded from school than other children (O'Regan 2009).
- In a recent UK study, persistent nonattendance was found among 43% of autistic pupils, with the majority of absences (more than 40%) due to so-called 'school refusal' (Totsika et al 2020).
- Only 25% of autistic children claim to feel happy or included in school (NAS 2021a)
- Pupils with a statement of SEN or an EHCP had an overall school absence rate twice that of those with no identified SEN (DfE 2019b).
- Children with SEND are twice as likely as other children to be bullied regularly (Mencap n.d.).

A lack of appropriate support may be contributing to an increasing and disproportionate number of children with SEND being removed from schools by their parents to be home educated (Ofsted 2019; Whittaker & Belger, 2021). It is not known how many parents who have turned, often in desperation, to home education may have otherwise wanted to first explore a flexi-schooling arrangement, had this been accessible to them. Evidence certainly shows this to be sometimes the case (Parsons & Lewis 2010; Smith et al 2020).

There have also been reports of increased parental requests to flexi-school following the months of COVID-19 school closures in 2020. While many parents found home education

challenging and struggled with a lack of resources and support, some reported benefits of 'greater opportunities for quality parent-child time…and lower levels of anxiety amongst some children who find the school environment overwhelming' (Aberdeenshire Council, 2020). This underscores the fact that it is not always a lack of SEND support that prompts parents' desire to flexi-school. Adaptations and support ('reasonable adjustments') within school, even if extensive, may not be enough to meet need if it is the full-time school environment itself that presents the greatest barrier to a child's social-emotional wellbeing (Lawrence, 2012).

In the Children and Families Act 2014 and the subsequent 'SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years', also published in 2014, it was established that children, young people and their families should play a much more central part in making decisions about how needs could best be met. Termed 'co-ownership' or 'co-production', this involves the graduated approach to SEN(D) using an 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle, with the child and family at the heart of the process (Packer, 2017).

Flexi-schooling is intended to encapsulate co-ownership and the prioritisation of children's needs and wellbeing in all decision-making processes. The extent to which it is understood, practised and valued is the subject of the following chapters.

Summary

Flexi-schooling is an important arrangement to consider for at least some children with SEND (or additional support or learning needs) because:

1. Full-time school attendance may not always optimise their learning and development outcomes
2. Flexi-schooling may support more manageable routines and inclusion
3. Flexi-schooling may be the most viable and suitable arrangement for a child's physical, mental and emotional health and safety
4. Parents and their children can access resources and support that may lie beyond their financial or practical reach if choosing home education

3. UK policy on flexi-schooling

This section considers the UK's legal framework for flexi-schooling and both central and local government guidance.

For reasons not entirely clear, guidance provided by the Department for Education (DfE) on flexi-schooling appears incomplete. More comprehensive guidance is issued by some (possibly a minority of) local governments.

3.1 The legal framework

Allowances for flexi-school arrangements in the UK link to specific points of legislation and both national and local government guidance.

The Education Act of 1996 provides a legal framework for flexi-schooling. Section 7 of the Act states that the parent/carer of every child of compulsory school age is responsible for ensuring the child receives:

> *…efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs they may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.*

The Act thereby stipulates allowances for different educational objectives and different locations of learning. These allowances apply equally to children with and without SEND. It is also worth noting that there is nothing in law stating what exactly constitutes 'full-time' education, since this will vary considerably according to 'age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs'.

The Act also refers to a 'general principle that pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents, so far as that is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.'

Under law, the parent commits an offence if their child is registered as a pupil at a school and fails to attend regularly (Section 444). However, this ruling does not apply if leave of absence has been authorised 'by the governing body or proprietor of the school' (444(3)).

Whilst the Act permits schools to accommodate flexi-schooling, parents have no legal right to such arrangements, unlike the legal right to a school placement or to elective home education.

Flexi-schooling rules in England and Wales include the following:

1. Flexi-schooling can only be initiated at the request of a parent or carer with parental responsibility; it is not an arrangement that can be initiated by the child's school.
2. The National Curriculum does not apply to the non-school based part of the education of a flexi-schooled child unless this was part of the arrangement/agreement between the school and the parent.[d]
3. Head teachers can refuse to agree to flexi-schooling requests.

[d] For example, see in references: Gloucestershire County Council 2019; Wokingham Borough Council 2020.

The Welsh government and some Local Authorities[e] further stipulate:

4. There is no right of appeal against the decision of a head-teacher not to agree to a flexi-schooling request.

In Scotland, flexi-schooling requests are normally considered jointly by the child's school and the local council (Scottish Government 2021).

According to the Department for Education, Local Authorities in England do not have the right to prohibit a flexi-schooling arrangement if agreed by parent and head teacher.[f]

3.2 Department for Education: Flexi-schooling guidance

The conditions under which flexi-schooling may be considered are not fully described by the Department for Education (DfE).

The DfE's principal flexi-schooling guidance is issued in two elective home education (EHE) publications, one written for Local Authorities (DfE 2019a), the other for parents (DfE 2019d).

By issuing principal guidance through EHE publications, rather than through guidance for schools specifically, the DfE appears to imply that flexi-school arrangements are usually made in support of, and supplementary to, home education.

The guidance itself, confined to a few brief paragraphs, is liable to enforce such a view. In its publication aimed at Local Authorities, the DfE states:

> 1.3 *Although children being home-educated are not normally registered at any school, parents sometimes choose to make arrangements for a child to receive part of the total provision at a school – the purpose of this will often be to provide education in specific subjects more easily than is possible at home. Such arrangements are sometimes known as 'flexi-schooling'.*

The DfE later states:

> 10.7 *Some children who are educated at home most of the time are also registered at school and attend school for part of the week – perhaps one day a week. The purpose of this is usually to ensure the provision in specific subjects is satisfactory, although it can also help in other ways such as socialisation.*

It is not clear why the DfE describes a flexi-schooling approach relevant to only a proportion of flexi-schooling families, where 'children…are educated at home most of the time'.

DfE guidance states that head-teachers hold the right to refuse parents' requests for flexi-schooling arrangements. Schools that do allow such arrangements are instructed to mark home-based education as an authorised absence, indicating the use of code C, rather than code

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[e] For example, see in references: Kirklees 2021; Essex County Council 2019.
[f] Clarification on this point can be found in the DfE's response to a 2018 Freedom of Information request. See: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/the_legality_of_flexi_schooling

B for an approved education activity off-site (S.10.8). The DfE recognises that some schools may consider this a disincentive to allow flexi-schooling arrangements:

> *Some schools have expressed concern that such absence may have a detrimental effect for the purpose of Ofsted inspection, but this is not the case; some schools with significant flexi-schooling numbers have had good outcomes from Ofsted inspections.*

It is important to recognise that the DfE acknowledges flexi-schooling arrangements can work for schools, even those with 'significant flexi-schooling numbers.'

Missing from DfE guidance is discussion of flexi-schooling where a child's learning is predominantly school-based. This is a common type of arrangement in UK schools (see Section 4). The DfE's omission of this arrangement may be causing some misunderstandings among parents, schools and Local Authorities.

3.3 Local Authorities: flexi-schooling guidance

Across the UK there is significant variation in Local Authority flexi-schooling policy and viewpoint. Scoping work undertaken for this review suggests many LAs have not published guidance, and in such cases parents and schools are expected to refer to national (mostly DfE) guidelines.

Information received from more than one-third of all Local Authorities in Wales during this review suggests most Welsh Authorities have no flexi-schooling policy or official guidelines. Parents and school heads may read the Welsh Government's 'non-statutory' guidance to LAs on elective home education, which gives just three short paragraphs on flexi-schooling, describing it as 'generally a short-term measure to address a particular issue or concern' (Welsh Government, 2018). This may cause some confusion, as the wording implies a temporary 'reduced timetable' rather than a flexi-schooling arrangement. LAs, head-teachers and parents may also refer to DfE guidance.

In Scotland, little information is given at the national level, though here, as noted earlier, the authorisation of flexi-schooling is normally a joint decision between Local Authorities and schools (Scottish Government 2021). Some Scottish LAs have not issued any flexi-schooling guidelines and may not wish to support it at all, whereas others have created supportive environments. This is described further below and in Section 4.1.

In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority (rather than Local Authorities) has responsibility for delivering education services. The Authority reports no flexi-schooling policy and holds no relevant data (EANI 2021).

From a random review of 31 English Local Authorities, nine were found to have issued flexi-schooling policy or guidance.[g] Some LAs make just brief reference to flexi-schooling in their Elective Home Education Policy to describe the arrangement and distinguish it from both EHE and part-time school timetables (or 'reduced timetables'), without issuing guidance as such (e.g.

[g] LAs with flexi-schooling policy or guidelines include Cornwall Council; Essex County Council; Gloucestershire County Council; Hertfordshire County Council; Norfolk County Council; Southampton City Council; Surrey County Council; West Sussex County Council; Wokingham Borough Council. (see Appendix 5 for LAs contacted and considered in this review.)

Suffolk County Council; Derbyshire County Council).[h] Others go further, quoting DfE guidance and adding supplementary guidance for parents and schools (e.g. Gloucestershire), or supplying comprehensive guidance directly to schools (e.g. West Sussex).

3.3.1 Guidance in detail

Legal and administrative flexi-schooling guidelines generally advise schools to consider applications on a case-by-case basis.

At a minimum, such arrangements should be consistent with:

- the needs and welfare of the child
- the provision of efficient education and the efficient use of resources
- the enhanced educational benefit of the child concerned
- the limitation of the risk of exposure to subsequent claims against the Local Authority and the school, and
- the avoidance of an unreasonable additional workload for members of staff at the school

Some LAs disclose important legal clarifications on issues that may not be well understood by schools new to flexi-schooling arrangements. These include:[i]

1. Insurance: There are no additional or exceptional insurance implications for the school for children who are on a school roll but who attend part-time under a flexi-schooling arrangement. (E.g. Cornwall Council 2017)
2. Funding: schools receive full funding for flexi-school children, who must be included in all census returns. (E.g. Essex County Council 2019)
3. Right to withdraw agreement: the school has the right to withdraw its agreement to a flexi-schooling arrangement if it considers the home-education element unsuitable and parents have declined to take remedial action. (E.g. Devon County Council 2020)

While Local Authorities are broadly consistent concerning the legalities governing flexi-schooling, they diverge in their opinion of the arrangement.

Some LAs may not want to encourage the arrangement at all. Westminster City Council in London, for example, has issued no guidance, and in correspondence with 20/20health stated, ‘given the complication of this arrangement the Council [does] not support or encourage this’ (Westminster City Council, 2021).

Essex County Council guides the arrangement but with some clear notes of caution. It states (without caveat) that records of authorised absences (code C) for the sessions of home education ‘will have a detrimental impact on the overall absence levels of the school in question.’ The council also warns that ‘arrangements for flexi-schooling may make both the identification of SEN and the ability to meet those needs more difficult to secure’ (Essex County Council, 2019).

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[h] See references for LA links (Suffolk County Council, Derbyshire County Council).
[i] LA guidelines can be accessed via links in references

Surrey County Council issues comprehensive flexi-schooling guidance with important recommendations for a collaborative approach to the arrangement. It also includes some notes of caution and states with bold-font emphasis that flexi-schooling 'should **not** be promoted by schools' (Surrey County Council, n.d.).

As noted above, a number of LAs are broadly neutral about flexi-schooling and, in greater or lesser detail, simply describe the relevant framework and regulations. These include Northumberland, Staffordshire, Devon, Walsall and Vale of Glamorgan (Wales).[j]

Gloucestershire LA, by contrast, quotes the DfE's statement that 'some schools with significant flexi-schooling numbers have had good outcomes from Ofsted inspections.' It also highlights 'perceived benefits' of flexi-schooling (section 4.1) and makes suggestions as to how flexi-schooling can be designed so as not to negatively impact friendships within the school (Gloucester County Council 2019).

West Sussex County Council has provided flexi-schooling guidance directly to schools. This includes a comprehensive list of factors to consider and the stipulation that where a child has an EHCP, decisions to agree flexi-schooling must be taken in conjunction with the LA. West Sussex and Cornwall Council go further than many LAs in their guidance by providing templates for formal flexi-schooling agreements, allowing schools and parents to set out the rationale, expectations and structures of the arrangements (West Sussex CC 2021; Cornwall Council 2017 (See also Appendix 2)).

In Scotland, Edinburgh is supportive of flexi-schooling and emphasises that all City of Edinburgh Council schools are eligible for flexi-schooling applications (CoEC n.d.). Other LAs particularly accommodating of flexi-schooling include Fife and Dumfries & Galloway. Aberdeenshire Council has recently undertaken a flexi-schooling review and issued comprehensive guidelines, though instructs that 'flexi-schooling arrangements may not exceed 20% of the school week' (Aberdeenshire Council, 2020a, 2020b).

Some authorities advise head teachers to accommodate flexi-schooling only in exceptional circumstances. There may of course be internal communications between LAs and schools that also affect willingness for implementation.

Appendix 1 provides an example of a flexi-schooling process flow chart, produced by Southampton City Council's Inclusion Services to guide local schools in their considerations of flexi-schooling requests.

Appendix 2 provides an example of a flexi-schooling checklist and agreement, published by Cornwall Council.

[j] See references for relevant links: Northumberland, Staffordshire, Devon, Walsall, Vale of Glamorgan.

3.3.2 Academies and Free Schools

Academies and free schools are accountable to central government, not Local Authorities. Such schools may or may not refer to LA flexi-schooling guidance.

20/20health contacted 13 multi-academy trusts in England to enquire about flexi-schooling policies. Eleven trusts responded within the review period: none had issued flexi-schooling policy, though one reported that guidelines were being written. Several trusts reported following DfE guidelines and three were able to confirm the presence of flexi-schooled pupils within their network. Correspondence also confirmed that trustees are sometimes involved in decision making on flexi-schooling arrangements, together with head-teachers.

This review was unable to establish whether academies and free schools are on balance more likely than Local Authority maintained schools to accommodate flexi-schooling arrangements.

3.3.3 Concerning SEND

In relation to flexi-schooling children with SEND, Local Authority guidance is often brief, and neutral or cautionary in tone. This is perhaps not surprising given the lack of flexi-schooling experience and recorded outcomes within the education system.

Some LAs make clear that any flexi-schooling proposal for a child with a statement of SEN or an EHCP has to be discussed with the SENDCo or SEND Team.[k] Since the LA has a statutory duty to ensure EHCP provision, it may be involved in a decision to agree flexi-schooling, as noted above in the case of West Sussex.[l] Some LAs also warn of the potential negative impacts flexi-schooling arrangements may have on SEND support, for example where children with a disability may not be able to access specialised equipment designed to meet their specific needs.[m]

Only rarely will an LA suggest potential *benefits* of flexi-schooling children with SEND. Fife Council, for example, considers flexible packages as potentially important for children who struggle with the full-time school environment:

> *An approved flexible package may be most appropriate in the following circumstances (these exemplars are not exhaustive):*
>
> - *where the pupil has experienced ongoing difficulties with accessing the mainstream school curriculum despite appropriate supports being put in place to meet their learning, behaviour and social needs;*
> - *where there is a likelihood of interrupted attendance for whatever reason;*
> - *where school attendance has proved difficult despite intervention and support from Pupil Support services and others.*

The council states that approved flexible packages are aimed at supporting pupils who are being educated at school but 'who need adjustments to the breadth and nature of the demands set out in mainstream schools' (Fife Council 2014).

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[k] For example, see references: Northumberland CC 2019.
[l] See also in references: Essex County Council 2019.]
[m] For example, see references: Aberdeenshire Council, 2020b.

4. UK Flexi-schooling in practice

Flexi-schooling remains rare in much of the UK, despite being 'a widely accepted arrangement' (Poultner & Anderson 2019). The number of flexi-schooled pupils has been recorded in Scotland but is unknown in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, where there is no requirement for schools to report such arrangements.

There is some published evidence (mainly school websites and grey literature) on how schools organise flexi-schooling. Ofsted provides occasional insights into schools with significant numbers flexi-schooled pupils, but there has been no systematic outcomes reporting on flexi-schooling in the UK.

4.1 Scotland

4.1.1 Prevalence

Across Scotland an increase in flexi-schooling requests has been reported (Aberdeenshire Council, 2020a), and some Local Authorities appear to have created welcoming environments for flexi-schooling arrangements.

In 2017–18, an informal research group called the 'Dumfries and Galloway Parenting Science Gang' (DGPSG 2019), with funding from the Wellcome Trust, undertook a review of flexi-schooling in Scotland. As part of this research, the group issued freedom of information (FOI) requests to Scotland's 32 Local Authorities to investigate how they manage flexi-schooling policies and processes, and to ascertain flexi-schooling numbers in each region.

Of the 30 of 32 LAs who responded, three said they did not permit flexi-schooling and a further eight said they had no flexi-schooling pupils. By contrast, Edinburgh reported 45 flexi-schooled pupils, Dumfries & Galloway 62, and Fife 156.

DGPSG authors report that Fife 'actively uses Flexible Educational Arrangements' across its locality. The authority recorded a more than three-fold increase in requests to flexi-school between the 2015-16 and 2016-17 academic years, and by 2018 had a record of 61 flexi-schooled pupils at primary schools and 94 at secondary. Argyll & Bute Council was the only other LA to report a significant number (38) of flexi-schooling secondary school pupils.

Surveys with parents indicated that children's home-based flexi-days typically range from a day a fortnight to two days a week, with most out of school for a day a week.

In total, Scottish LAs reported some 345 pupils, 0.05% of a total school roll of 682,305, as flexi-schooled in 2018.

4.1.2 Fife in focus

As part of this review, 20/20health asked Fife Council to provide updated figures for flexi-schooling pupils at primary and secondary schools within its locality. Findings across 134 primary schools revealed a total of 218 flexi-schooled children, representing 0.78% of all enrolled children. Across 18 secondary schools, Fife reported 178 flexi-schooled pupils, representing 0.81% of all enrolled pupils.

The flexi-schooling total stood at 396 in December 2021, a greater number in Fife alone than in the whole of Scotland just three years earlier. This gives some indication of a continuing increase in flexi-schooling arrangements in some areas of Scotland over the past three years. Fife has seen a 150% increase in flexi-schooling pupils within this period (Fife Council, 2021).

The prevalence of children with additional support needs within Fife's flexi-schooled population is reported in section 4.4.1.

4.2 England, Wales & Northern Ireland

4.2.1 Prevalence

With no systematic collection of data on flexi-schooling by Local Authorities in England and Wales, or by Northern Ireland's Education Authority, the number of flexi-schooled children is difficult to estimate.

Applying Scotland's 2018 flexi-schooling prevalence (0.05%) to the UK's total maintained-school population of 9.9 million[n] would indicate a flexi-schooling population in the region of 5,000 pupils. But reasons for extrapolating Scotland's prevalence figure are not strong.

The Welsh government confirms the existence of flexi-schooling practice by stating that 'flexi-schooling is more prevalent in some LAs than others' (Welsh Government, 2018). Some LAs in England and Wales confirm flexi-schooling practice on their websites, though not numbers.[o]

20/20health contacted 32 Local Authorities in England and Wales for estimates on flexi-schooling numbers. Of the 25 LAs that responded, just three gave fixed numbers and one an estimate, indicating about 28 flexi-schooled children among a total school population of 217,000. According to this information, there may be around 1,200 flexi-schooled children in England and Wales currently, representing significantly lower prevalence than in Scotland.

20/20health also contacted 13 multi-academy trusts in England: nine responded, though only seven with data relevant to flexi-schooling. A total of 66 flexi-schooled pupils were reported by three trusts (combined), out of a seven-trust total of 195,026 pupils. There is no hard evidence to suggest that academies and local-authority schools are equally amenable (or reluctant) to agree to flexi-schooling arrangements, but data from this small sample otherwise suggest around 3,000 flexi-schooled pupils in England.

Though flexi-schooling data are in short supply, an index of flexi-schooling *interest* is the 'Flexischooling Families UK' Facebook group, with a membership of around 10,000. Posts on the site make clear that not all members have flexi-schooled children, and parents frequently disclose difficulties in persuading schools to accept the arrangement. Some report being given a flexi-schooling trial period, but requests are often refused if there are no precedents of flexi-

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[n] Source: Education and training statistics for the UK, 2020. Available: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk/2020

[o] For example, Derbyshire CC (2019): '*We have a small number of collaborative examples of flexi-schooling in Derbyshire where both the parents and the schools have agreed a combination of "education at school" and "education off site".*'

schooling within the school. In a few cases, heads have been open to learning about flexi-schooling from other schools that have experience of implementation.

The Facebook group has created a map of Flexi-schooling schools in the UK.[p] The map is not exhaustive, but it shows 76 (infant or primary) schools in England that either actively support flexi-schooling (22) or consider it on a case-by-case basis (54).[q] A minority of these schools are fee-paying.

Independent flexi-schooling guidance and advocacy has been published by the Centre for Personalised Education. This includes a Flexi-schooling Handbook for England & Wales, a range of free information sheets for parents and an additional document for school heads. Feedback on the 'Flexischooling Families UK' Facebook group (where information sheets are also available) suggests these resources are valued by parents and have been useful to schools.

For information visit website: https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/flexischooling-info-sheets/

4.2.2 Schools' support and organisation of flexi-schooling

The vast majority of schools that openly support and encourage consideration of flexi-schooling are primary schools, and many of these organise flexi-schooling according to a fixed set of options. There will be many primary and secondary schools that do not publicise a flexi-schooling approach where arrangements have been made only for a very small proportion of pupils.

Most well-known among supportive schools is Hollinsclough Church of England (VA) Primary School in Staffordshire. This small academy was the subject of a CfBT Education Trust report, titled 'New models for organising education: Flexi-schooling – how one school does it well' (Gutherson & Mountford-Lees 2011).

Hollinsclough began its flexi-schooling journey by making such arrangements available to home-educating families. This was an opportunity to re-engage children who had previously refused school. In some cases, these children began attending just one or two days a week.

Hollinsclough has since established an approach of mandatory attendance on three consecutive core learning days, Tuesday to Thursday, and flexi-day options for Monday and Friday. The school itself has compiled a list of 10 primary schools affiliated with its flexi-schooling concept.[r] These schools are similarly small and have established the same 3:2 core and non-core days approach.

Many other schools proactive in their support of flexi-schooling favour the approach of 3:2 core and non-core teaching days. In the case of four primary schools under the Westcliffe Federation in Shropshire, for example, core days are designated as Monday to Wednesday; pupils in Year 6 are however required to attend full-time in preparation for transition to secondary school.

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[p] Map can be accessed here: http://www.home-education.org.uk/flexischool-map.htm
[q] The compilers of the flexi-schooling map of schools acknowledge the map to be incomplete since its information derives from Facebook members' feedback only.
[r] The list of schools is available here: https://hollinsclough.staffs.sch.uk/federation/ [Accessed 23/11/21]

Rackenford Primary School in Devon has a very similar policy, though still with some leeway in Year 6 to flexi-school.

Variations to this arrangement include West Newcastle Academy and Stroud Green Primary School in Finsbury Park (London), which permit just one flexi-day per week. Long Marston CE Primary School near York expects a minimum attendance of two school days per week in EYFS/KS1, and a minimum of three school days per week in KS2.

In several cases reviewed, schools' flexi-schooling policies were oriented towards encouraging home educators to consider the local schooling option. For some schools (like Hollinsclough initially), this has been motivated by a need to increase school numbers to remain viable.[s] Such situations are likely to be more common to small rural primary schools than to schools in urban locations.

Exceptions to pre-set flexi-schooling arrangements may or may not apply to children with SEND. In fact, judging by the small body of literature and anecdotal evidence, schools may be more willing to arrange personalised flexi-schooling where they have not already established a flexi-schooling model of core and non-core teaching days (see also 4.4.2 below).

Appendix 3 provides considerations for parent–school flexi-schooling agreement by Gutherson & Mountford-Lees (2011), based on learning from Hollinsclough Primary.

4.3 OFSTED reporting on flexi-schooling

This review examined the most recent Ofsted reports of 18 schools with supportive flexi-schooling policies. In two-thirds of cases, Ofsted made no specific mention of flexi-schooling arrangements. This may be due to very small numbers of pupils who are flexi-schooled within those schools. In the other six cases, Ofsted's reviews of flexi-schooling arrangements were very positive, with no concerns noted. For example:

Michaelchurch Escley Primary, Herefordshire (Ofsted 2016):

> *The pupils who are flexi-schooled make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Leaders carefully monitor their progress and reserve the right to withdraw the flexi-school agreement if pupils begin to fall behind others who attend school full time.*
>
> *Those who access the 'flexi-school' arrangement are hugely grateful for the opportunity this affords them to be closely involved in their child's education by home-schooling their child for one or two days a week.*

[s] For example, see references: The School Run (n.d.)

Hollinsclough Church of England Academy, Buxton (Ofsted 2018a):

> *Leaders have organised the curriculum very carefully to ensure that pupils who take up the option of flexi-schooling do not miss out on any subject areas…Some subjects, including computing, are delivered in such a way that flexi-school pupils access the materials from home through the internet.*
>
> *School attendance information shows that when the flexi-school agreement is taken into account, pupils' attendance is broadly in line with national averages.*

St Levan Primary School, Cornwall (Ofsted 2018b):

> [On children's attendance:] *Governors have worked hard to find solutions for families that struggle with this important aspect of school life. They are particularly proud of the school's use of 'flexischooling' that encourages families who choose to teach their children at home to try school life for agreed periods. This approach has led to a number of families deciding to enrol their children full-time.*

Erpingham CE Primary School, Norwich (Ofsted 2014):

> *The flexi-school timetable, used to allow individual pupils to be partly home educated, works very well.*
>
> *'Flexi-school' pupils experience a wide range of learning on days not in school. Pupils often choose to link these to the topics they are learning about in school. Many of these pupils benefit from additional art, music and languages lessons.*

What this shows, and what the Department for Education has acknowledged (see Section 3.2), is that well-organised flexi-schooling, arranged for clear and rational reasons, can contribute very positively to Ofsted reports.

There is no foundation for the often cited concern that 'code C' authorised absences for flexi-schooling negatively impact a school's overall Ofsted rating.

4.4 Concerning SEND

4.4.1 Prevalence of SEND among flexi-schoolers

In Scotland, the term SEND is not recognised. Instead, the Scottish government uses 'Additional Support Needs' (ASN) to recognise not only children with learning difficulties and disabilities, but also children who speak English as an additional language, refugees, children with a parent in prison, and various others who may require additional support under the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act.[t] It is still relevant to note that in 2018, children with ASN represented more than one third (35%) of all flexi-schooled pupils (DGPSG 2019). Pupils with ASN otherwise accounted for 26.6% of Scotland's total school population in 2017 (Scottish Government 2019).

During the review period, 20/20health received updated flexi-schooling information from Fife Council, the Local Authority with probably the highest number of flexi-schooled pupils in

[t] A government list (not exhaustive) of children or young people who may require additional support can be viewed here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/pages/18/

Scotland. Among a total flexi-school population of 396, nearly 53% (208) had ASN, compared to 21% with ASN in Fife's school population overall (Fife Council, 2021).

Correspondence with 13 multi-academy trusts in England, referred to above, provided an opportunity to gauge SEND prevalence among pupils currently flexi-schooling. Only three trusts reported cases of flexi-schooling. The ARK network reported 43 flexi-schooled children across its primary and secondary schools, 75% (32) of whom had SEND. Another trust with just four flexi-schooled children reported three (75%) with SEND. The REACH2 Academy Trust (comprising primary schools only) reported 19 flexi-schooled pupils, though it had no record of the number with SEND.

It is not known whether high prevalence of children with SEND among some trusts' flexi-schooling pupils is due to parental demand exclusively, or whether there is (additionally) greater willingness among schools to agree to flexi-schooling requests in such cases.

4.4.2 School guidance and personalised timetabling

There is very little detail published by schools in specific relation to flexi-schooling children with SEND. According to documents seen by this review, schools will often state that the same flexi-schooling guidelines apply to children with and without SEND. Provisions for SEND are clarified within the written agreement between parents and the school and noted in any SEND support or EHC plan.[u] Involvement of the school's SENDCo and sometimes the local SEN Team is expected in flexi-school planning.

One of the most important SEND considerations in flexi-schooling is personalised timetabling. It may be agreed, for example, that a child should attend school during mornings only, or for two or three half-days per week, or an hour and a half each day: personalisation implies there is no one-size-fits-all approach to timetabling (see Robertson and McHardy 2020; Lawrence 2020).

It is not clear whether schools with pre-set flexi-schooling days (as described above) are inclined to accommodate personalised timetabling for children with SEND. The majority of school policies examined by this review did not specify such allowances. Some parents of children with SEND have however reported wellbeing benefits from one or two fixed flexi-days, while others report any full school day to be beyond the coping capacity of their child.

Head-teachers may agree to special allowances for a child's attendance at school events at times or on days that are normally home-based. Accommodations for some children with SEND may be complex and require a great deal of forethought. It is considered best practice for all flexi-schooling planning that schools make clear what allowances there will be regarding special events that fall outside the normal arrangement (Gutherson & Mountford-Lees, 2011). (See Appendix 3.)

Parents' flexi-schooling decision-making and experience in the context of SEND is further explored in Section 5.

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[u] If a flexi-schooling arrangement is officially recognised in an EHC plan, it becomes legal provision, though subject to annual review.

4.4.3 Flexi-schooling challenges and risks

With the government's drive for stronger SEND inclusion, it is understandable that some school heads (and Local Authorities) may want to resist opening the door to flexi-schooling, considering it antithetical to their inclusion policy. They may also have concerns of inequalities of access, increased staff workloads, safeguarding, attendance records and SAT/exam results, among others.

Local Authorities emphasise that schools remain responsible for learning outcomes in flexi-schooling arrangements. Hesitation among head-teachers to agree to flexi-schooling is understandable where there is doubt of the capacity or skills of the parent(s) to home-educate, or the school itself has no experience of implementation. Local Authority concerns of logistical risks and challenges have already been noted (Section 3.3).

Impacts of flexi-schooling children with SEND — the real-world results — have barely been studied. Within the very limited UK evidence base is exploratory research by the Poverty Alliance of six flexi-schooling families, five third-sector practitioners and three education representatives in Fife, Scotland (Robertson and McHardy 2020). While this small study did not disclose the types and levels of additional support needs (ASN) among pupil participants, it identified several challenges and risks of potential relevance to flexi-schooling pupils with SEND. These included:

1. a lack of communication with schools from parents and/or young people
2. pupils not following the timetables they are given
3. a lack of resources, both within and outside of school

Together these issues were seen as negatively impacting young people's educational attainment. There was also evidence that flexi-schooling (or Flexible Educational Arrangements, as termed in Fife) can have negative consequences on family circumstances, including extra pressures to care for children who are not in school and financial implications because of not being able to work. Researchers' recommendations included a need for clear timetabling guidance for parents and their children (e.g. who is responsible for what and when), as well as the involvement of key partner agencies in timetable planning. Third sector involvement was also considered important to supporting communication between parents/pupils and schools.

Further evidence comes from a small UK study of parents of flexi-schooled autistic children (Lawrence 2018). It found that despite the many flexi-schooling advantages expressed by parents, some disclosed a lack of confidence in supporting their child with the academic curriculum and widening their child's social experience outside the family. Some also expressed concerns around access to exams, [future] schools, universities and job applications.

Research elsewhere has shown that some autistic children have difficulty doing schoolwork in the home. In some cases this may be linked to a desire to have clear boundaries between the school and home environment (NAS 2021b). This could be an important consideration in managing flexi-schooling expectations.

On the subject of safeguarding issues, Gutherson & Mountford-Lees (2011) highlight the importance of partnership and devising a contract acceptable to all parties. Local Authority concerns around safeguarding are raised in a study by Poultney & Anderson (2019), though

school-leader participants argued that such concerns were not a deterrent to their flexi-schooling model:

> *…we were challenged to say how we made sure the children were safe on the Monday and Friday [flexi-days], which … we thought was ridiculous, because how do we know they are safe on a Saturday and a Sunday? How [do we] know they are safe during the 6 weeks [of holiday]?*

The authors note it is unlikely any request to flexi-school would be approved if there were safeguarding concerns (Poultney & Anderson 2019).

Gutherson & Mountford-Lees (2011), despite their advocacy of flexi-schooling, note some potential concerns in terms of the impact on teaching staff (where workload increases), children's feelings of isolation, and ensuring accurate and appropriate assessment of learning. (With regard to the latter, the hybrid approach schools have had to adopt since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic may have yielded new and important learning for many teachers.)

A further risk arises where schools make allowances for optional flexi-days by implementing highly concentrated, full-day learning sessions for compulsory school days, which may be unsuitable for some children with SEND.

Though literature evidence of flexi-schooling practice is embryonic, it appears the success of arrangements rests largely on mutual clarity and understanding between schools and parents on roles and expectations. Flexi-schooling arrangements for a child with SEND may be complicated and each request needs to be considered according to its unique circumstances and with the involvement of the school SENDCo or statutory SEN Team.

Despite recognising some very real challenges and risks, studies have not given schools reasons for a policy ban on flexi-schooling children with SEND on grounds of complexity, safeguarding, pupil disadvantage, socialisation outcomes, absences, education outcomes or inequalities.

5. SEND in focus: Why might parents want to flexi-school?

Few studies have captured the motivations behind rising demand for flexi-schooling. There is also little understanding of aspects contributing to the success or failure of flexi-schooling children with SEND, specifically.

This chapter explores motivations for the arrangement and provides insights into the home-based elements of flexi-schooling. It draws in part on non-attributable evidence gathered from interviews and online closed groups, which are not identified for purposes of data protection. The chapter concludes with special consideration of children with autism and ADHD.

5.1 Parents' motivations for flexi-schooling

The absence of outcomes reporting on flexi-schooling children with SEND has not deterred parents from seeking such arrangements in the first place.

Judging by a small body of evidence, parents of children with SEND are likely to explore flexi-schooling arrangements either because they consider school-based support insufficient to meet their child's needs, or they believe full-time school attendance is, or would be, overwhelming and detrimental to their child's wellbeing and safety.

Such parents may share some similar concerns with parents who elect (or feel compelled) to home-school children with SEND. In its 2010 report 'Local authorities and home education', Ofsted noted:

> *…almost all the parents surveyed who had children with special educational needs and/or disabilities had removed them from school because they believed their child's needs were not being met.*

In a later survey, exploring parents' reasons for moving children from secondary schools to home education, Ofsted found that 'special educational needs and/or medical, behavioural or other well-being needs were the main reasons for moves to home education.'[v]

Studies in the UK have documented parents' specific concerns and reasons for withdrawing children with SEND from the school system to home-educate. These include:

1. a lack of understanding among staff around issues of special needs, particularly in the area of autism (Kendall & Taylor 2016)
2. parents/carers' concerns in relation to SEND and wellbeing not taken seriously by school staff (Smith et al 2020)
3. impact of the school environment upon the child (Kendall & Taylor 2016)
4. school or LA failure to make statemented provision (Badman 2009)
5. child being unhappy, stressed or depressed at school (Parsons & Lewis 2010)

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[v] This implies (for the UK generally) that it is the minority of parents who deregister their children for pedagogical, opportunistic, philosophical or religious reasons. See Ofsted 2019. Exploring moving to home education in secondary schools: research summary Published 15 October 2019.

6. schools' inability to manage behaviour (O'Hagan et al 2021)
7. disappointment or bad experience with formal education (Parsons & Lewis 2010)
8. failure to engage in partnership with parents (Kendall & Taylor 2016)
9. perceived difficultly of obtaining an Education Health and Care Plan (Smith et al 2020)
10. schools not following EHCP recommendations (Smith et al 2020)
11. lack of flexible and inclusive practice (O'Hagan et al 2021)
12. bullying and concerns about the child's safety (O'Hagan et al 2021)
13. school system's focus on assessment and attainment (Maxwell et al 2018)

The above concerns may not be shared equally between parents who home educate and those who flexi-school. However, a small body of evidence points to overlap in several areas, including lack of understanding among staff around issues of special needs; the impact of the school environment upon the child; specific needs not being met; and a lack of flexible and inclusive practice (Lawrence 2018; Robertson & McHardy 2020; Aberdeenshire Council 2020a).

Parents who flexi-school may have some degree of faith in the school to meet certain needs, while at the same time recognising a negative effect of full-time school attendance on their child. Some may have preferred to withdraw their child from school completely but were unable to take on full-time home education.

In one UK study, the majority of surveyed parents who home-educated children with SEND reported feeling 'pushed' into it, with no alternative but to withdraw their children from school. Most still wanted their children to attend school, but only if their needs were adequately met and learning suitably individualised. In this regard, some parents had suggested that provision needed to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate children's changing needs over time, 'for example, through offering a mix of school and home-based provision' (Parsons & Lewis 2010).

Ofsted has previously reported that when parents remove a child with SEND from school to be home-educated they are often faced with a lack of specialist support (Ofsted 2010). Some Local Authorities still warn of the potential challenges in meeting children's needs in both flexi-schooling and home-schooling situations. However, parents may consider flexi-schooling arrangements less likely to encounter such problems, since school services should help 'ease the coordination of access to specialist support and ensure that children's needs are met' (Gutherson & Mountford-Lees 2011).

Preference for a flexi-schooling arrangement over home-schooling may also link with concerns of inclusion. Lawrence (2018), interviewing parents of flexi-schooled autistic children, found that while all had decided to flexi-school after recognising their child's negative experiences in the full-time school system, they felt the sharing of education between home and school facilitated the child's access to school, through providing support for the child to prepare for and respond to stresses.

The same study recorded further reasons for flexi-schooling, including the reduction of destructive behaviour (with children having fewer meltdowns[w] at home compared to when in school) and as a way to formalise something that was already happening, for example where the child was physically unable to attend school, or regularly being sent home by the school.

The Poverty Alliance's exploratory research in Fife found anxiety among pupils to be a significant factor prompting flexi-schooling arrangements. Other issues included bullying or negative experiences with peers, and pupils' behavioural issues (Robertson & McHardy 2020).

5.2 Home-based elements of flexi-schooling arrangements

Home-educating parents of children with SEND have commented on the importance of 'adjusting the style and pace of learning to suit individual needs and the improved enjoyment of learning' (Parsons & Lewis 2010).

Similarly, some flexi-schooling parents have chosen a child-led learning approach for home-based education, allowing the child to choose activities based on their specific interests and accommodating different learning styles. Flexi-days may include small-group tuition and outdoor activities, such as forest school, and visits to museums and historical sites (Humphreys et al 2018; DGPSG 2019). Flexi-days are also an opportunity for a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to education. For example, a multi-week project on the Renaissance may draw together subjects of history, geography, art, music, religious studies and science, with greater or lesser emphasis according to the interests and capacity of the child.

Some schools may be supportive of parents who feel home-based flexi-schooling days should not include any demands for structured learning. Under law, without stipulation of the number of hours per week implied by 'full-time education', children with SEND can be granted important allowances. Neurodiverse children, for example, may need considerable downtime for their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Parents may therefore use flexi-days as low-demand periods for their child's 'decompression', allowing free-play and enabling full recharge for the next school day (see DGPSG 2019).

Home-based flexi-days can also be an important opportunity for parents to learn more about their child's condition and their changing needs as they grow and develop. For example, parents of autistic children have reported how flexi-days have provided an important opportunity to better understand their child's autism (Lawrence, 2018). Flexi-days also provide opportunities for the neurodiverse child to practice and develop soft skills and life skills. These skills may not be easily developed in environments that induce significant anxiety, or at the end of a full school day, when the child is often mentally, emotionally and socially exhausted.

An important distinction between flexi-schooling and homeschooling hinges on the fact that the school remains responsible for the child's learning outcomes in flexi-schooling arrangements. Therefore, whilst under UK law the national curriculum does not apply to the non-school-based part of flexi-schooling (see Section 3.1), some schools may only consent to implementation if the parent agrees to observe the national (or school's own) curriculum on home-based flexi-

[w] A meltdown is characterised by a complete loss of behavioural control, often occurring in response to overwhelming situations or a gradual build-up of stress and anxiety. It is distinct from a temper tantrum, which is an outburst of anger or frustration.

days. It is not clear how common these arrangements are, but Lawrence (2018) records concerns among parents of flexi-schooled autistic children in meeting curriculum requirements. However, of 23 parent-respondents to a flexi-schooling survey in Scotland, which included several parents of children with ASN, not one said they followed the school curriculum (DGPSG 2019). Still, some parents may welcome opportunities to give their child further support in areas they are struggling with in school, particularly in relation to core subjects.

Finally, parents may see flexi-days as opportunities for positive reinforcement, to build their child's motivations, self-esteem, self-confidence, values and good behaviours, all of which may be challenged by levels of high anxiety within the school environment.

5.3 In consideration of autism and ADHD

The SEND category is wide, covering any learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made. Children with SEND therefore experience different challenges and pressures in different measures within the school environment.

The government's SEND Code of Practice (2015) states that children's SEN are generally thought of in the following four broad areas of need and support:

- communication and interaction
- cognition and learning
- social, emotional and mental health
- sensory and/or physical needs

The Code of Practice continues: 'Individual children often have needs that cut across all these areas…and children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may have needs across all areas' (DfE & DH 2015). This means there are multiple aspects of the school environment, both within and outside of the classroom, that pose significant challenges to the autistic pupil.

Autism affects at least 1% of the population and is the condition most common to EHC plans (UK Parliament 2020; DfE 2019). At least 50% of children with autism may have four or more different co-existing conditions that can be variously maladaptive, emotional, or behavioural (Petrou et al 2018). Schools need to be aware that it is not uncommon for autistic children to have no clinical diagnosis of either primary or co-existing conditions (Healthy London Partnership 2017).

Evidence indicates… 30% to 80% of children with autism also meet the criteria for ADHD.

Rommelse et al. 2010

A contributing factor to this issue is that an autistic child may be adept at 'masking' — copying behaviour in order to fit in with others. The child appears 'neuro-typical' and happy within the school environment, but after a day of sensory challenges and mentally-exhausting social survival, the child's anxiety and distress levels can be at bursting point, and disruptive behaviour and meltdowns follow at home. It may be easy for teachers, who have witnessed only good, compliant behaviour in the classroom, to believe the problems relate to poor parenting or the home environment (Eaton 2016).

> *On so many occasions it is suggested that rather than the child having difficulties, the problems lie with the parents...Some of the parents I have worked with have even been accused of fabricating their child's problems.*
>
> Dr Judy Eaton, Clinical Psychologist, 2016

A lack of appropriate support and accommodations for autistic school children is substantiated by records of school absences. In a recent UK study, persistent nonattendance was found among 43% of autistic pupils, with so-called 'school refusal' the most common factor (Totsika et al 2020). The term school refusal is contentious since it fails to acknowledge children's possible anxiety and phobia resulting from exposure to upsetting, frightening and even traumatic experiences in the school environment. Children (autistic or otherwise) with these experiences may at times be simply incapable of attending school.

Deserving particular attention is autism with a profile of Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). The term PDA is not universally used by clinicians, with some preferring to note Extreme Demand Avoidance (EDA).[x]

Research by the PDA Society of 969 young people with PDA found that 70% were either not in school or regularly struggled to attend (PDA Society 2019). Supporting autistic children with PDA is a complex task, because a significant majority experience severe anxiety, and everyday demands can quickly compound to overwhelm and provoke meltdown. Moreover, this is a group of people:

> *…for whom the conventional highly structured approaches are not only unhelpful but can lead to increased and debilitating stress. Instead, collaborative approaches to learning and daily living tasks are significantly more effective. This need for a tailored approach makes it essential for this group to be identified.*
>
> (PDA Society 2019)

School-based support and timetabling that may be beneficial for an autistic child without PDA may therefore negatively affect an autistic child with PDA. Learning progress (both within and outside of the school) requires both flexibility and collaboration, with strong emphasis on child-led learning (Truman 2021).

In light of the diverse social and sensory challenges autistic children face in the school environment, it is little wonder that parents may see flexi-schooling as an opportunity for their child's refuge and refreshment. The psychologist Tony Attwood, a world-leading authority on autism, talks of the value of solitude for people with autism, away from people and challenging sensory experiences. But he asks: 'how easy is it to ever be alone at high school?' (Attwood 2014)

Another category of pupils likely to struggle with the full-time school environment are children with ADHD, particularly where they have co-existing conditions. ADHD prevalence rates among children range between 3% and 7%, with diagnosis in boys at least three times higher than in girls due to much earlier detection (Skogli et al 2013). Later diagnosis (or misdiagnosis) in girls may owe

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[x] In a recent UK study of 211 parents of autistic children, 27% of parents stated that their child had an additional diagnosis of PDA, and a further 43% recognised EDA behaviours in their child. See references: Truman, et al. 2021.

to multiple factors, including differences in predominant symptoms and the presence of comorbid psychiatric disorders linked to the internalising of ADHD symptoms (Quinn & Madhoo 2014).

It has long been established that ADHD's core symptoms — inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity — make meeting the daily rigours of school challenging (see Zentall 1993). Dr Tony Lloyd, CEO of the ADHD Foundation, writes:

> *For a child starting school with ADHD, the very experience of classroom-based learning very quickly becomes a source of distress. Being asked to sit still, not fidget, concentrate, remember information and work independently is very difficult for children with ADHD. Being disciplined constantly soon erodes the genetic love of learning and the child's distress manifests in fight or flight behaviours, work avoidance or acting out.*
>
> (Lloyd 2014)

Many children with ADHD have additional learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and sensory processing challenges. Often possessing low emotional resilience, they are easily frustrated and predisposed to anxiety and depression, which further undermines their cognitive functioning and attainment (Lloyd 2014).

Pupils with ADHD: co-existing conditions

1. At least two-thirds have at least one other coexisting condition
2. About 40% have oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)
3. Between 27% and 50% have conduct disorder (CD)
4. 38% have a mood disorder
5. 14% have depression
6. Up to 30% have anxiety
7. Up to 50% have a coexisting learning disorder
8. 20%–50% meet the criteria for autism

Sources: (Nos. 1-7) National Resource Center on ADHD (2015): (No.8) Rommelse et al. 2010

One study suggests that children with ADHD are at more than 100 times greater risk of being permanently excluded from school than other children (O'Regan 2009), such are the effects of the challenges and failure to meet need in the school system.

> *…schools that are failing — and under pressure to improve rapidly — can use exclusion to deliver improvements in key metrics…there are increasing accountability and financial pressures on schools, which heighten the risk of exclusion for pupils, whose complex needs require extra resources to assure their achievement.*
>
> Gill et al. (2017). Institute for Public Policy Research.

It has been said that children with ADHD work at least twice as hard as their peers without ADHD and need about twice as much downtime (Matlen 2021). This possibly explains the high proportion of children with ADHD who are flexi-schooled in the United States, especially in rural areas, where around one-quarter of all flexi-schooled children has the condition. Autism, too,

sees much higher prevalence among flexi-schoolers compared with the full-time enrolled and home-schooled.

The next section examines evidence from the US on the prevalence of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the flexi-schooled population. The US provides important insights into flexi-schooling demand, location, relevance according to disability and equality of access.

6. Evidence from the USA

6.1 Introduction

In the USA, flexi-schooling is usually referred to as 'part-time attendance' and occasionally 'dual enrolment'. The arrangement is much more common in the US compared to the UK, possibly owing to an education system that places less emphasis on examinations and school ranking.[y] The US has no national curriculum and no nationally-standardised tests for the early and middle school years.

At the same time, there is variation among US states in terms of flexi-schooling rules and the circumstances under which it is permitted. A recent twelve-state review of part-time enrolment found Washington to be among the most supportive states (Excel*in*Ed 2021). Washington State Legislature (WA 2015) makes clear:

> *An eligible part-time public school student shall be entitled to take any course, receive any ancillary service, and take or receive any combination of courses and ancillary services which is made available by a public school to full-time students.*

In West Virginia, only home-schooled pupils have the right to flexi-school. Some states, including Illinois and Maine, do not have policy statements supporting a pupil's right to flexi-school, but do allow for district discretion in permitting the arrangement. Arkansas and Idaho are examples of states that issue funding proportional to the pupil's participation within the school.

Across the US more broadly, Schafer and Khan (2017) found that the odds of choosing flexi-schooling over full-time enrolment increase for those living in the South or West, as compared with the Midwest and Northeast.

Where the UK and USA differ most is in the overall proportion of pupils attending school part-time. Based on data from 2012, Schafer and Khan (2017) estimate that just over 2% (1 in 50) of school-aged children are flexi-schooled in the US, implying a slightly greater number than those home-schooled (1.1 million versus 0.9 million).

In 2012, nearly half of 'enrolled' flexi-schoolers reported spending equal or more hours in school-based instruction compared to homeschool instruction.

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[y] Many US states have state-wide testing programs, but not all rank their schools and publish the results. See: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=62

6.2 Flexi-schooling children with disabilities

Schafer and Khan (2017) set out to understand the reasons and contexts influencing families' decisions to flexi-school children with disabilities in the US.

The researchers found that both in urban and rural settings, children with disabilities were overrepresented in the flexi-schooled population. This was particularly pronounced in rural areas, where 'schools face substantial challenges meeting the needs of special student populations.'

Table 1 lists need or disability prevalence in the full-time (F/T) enrolled, flexi-schooled and homeschooled populations. The data point to some significant variation, nowhere more pronounced than in the category of AD(H)D. One in four flexi-schooled children in rural areas has the condition, compared to one in nine within the full-time enrolled population, and just 1 in 21 within the home-schooled population.

Autism is twice as prevalent in the flexi-schooled population overall, and four times more common among rural flexi-schoolers, as compared to the full-time enrolled or home-school populations. Prevalence of serious emotional disability, pervasive development disorder (PDD) and orthopaedic disability among flexi-schoolers is at least twice that of the full-time enrolled population overall. Co-presenting conditions are not described.

It should be noted that the study authors use the term 'disability' as commonly applied in the USA context.

Table 1: 'Enrollment, Flexischooling, and Homeschooling in Rural and Urban Locations by Disability Type in the NHES-PFI 2012 Survey.' Schafer & Khan, 2017

Disability Status	F/T Enrolled %	Flexi-schooled %	Homeschooled %
Any (N=16,733)*	22.2	28.8	19.4
Rural (N=3,942)***	22.8	**42.5**	13.3
Urban (N=12,791)	22.0	25.9	24.2
Specific disabilities			
ADD*	9.7	14.1	8.4
Rural***	11.0	**26.0**	**4.8**
Urban	9.4	11.5	11.2
Autism**	1.6	**3.6**	1.3
Rural** [A]	1.3	**5.2**	1.1
Urban	1.6	**3.2**	1.5
Learning	8.2	11.7	7.6
Rural**	7.4	12.5	**3.3**
Urban	8.5	11.5	10.5
Serious emotional***	2.4	**5.3**	2.8
Rural[A]	2.0	**5.3**	1.6
Urban**	2.5	**5.3**	3.8
Orthopaedic**	1.8	**3.6**	1.2
Rural*[A]	2.1	**6.7**	**0.7**
Urban	1.7	3.0	1.6
PDD*	0.8	**1.9**	**1.6**
Rural [A]	0.9	0.5	0.4
Urban***	0.7	**2.2**	**2.5**

Notes: AD[H]D = attention deficit [hyperactivity] disorder. PDD = pervasive development disorder.

Boldface type indicates flexi-schooled or homeschooled percentages that vary significantly from enrolled percentage.

[A] Interpret with caution: cell count <5

*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

The survey also included many other types of disabilities (visual, hearing, speech, and others) for which there were no statistically significant differences in distribution across enrollment, flexi-schooling, and homeschooling groups, or between rural and urban contexts.

About one in four students attended rural schools in 2012.

The findings beg an important question: In the US, why do many parents of children with disabilities opt to flexi-school instead of enrol their child in school full-time or exclusively home-school?

One possible factor, posited by the researchers, is the availability of school-based resources. Disability prevalence among flexi-schoolers in rural locations is significantly higher than in

urban settings. The authors state that ‘smaller or more isolated rural schools face substantial challenges meeting the needs of special student populations’, thus parents may be more likely to request flexi-schooling arrangements. This stands in contrast to parents of children *without* disabilities, who in rural locations are *less* likely to flexi-school compared with those in urban settings.

At the same time, the decision to flexi-school, rather than fully home-school, appears to be linked to a need to draw on school-based resources and support in the absence of viable alternatives. Parents may also consider the arrangement important for socialisation.

Financial considerations may also be a factor. The study found that flexi-schoolers — who are racially and ethnically very similar to enrolled students — are on balance much more likely to be from low-income families compared to home-schoolers. They are also more likely to be from single-parent families (36% for flexi-schoolers, 31% for full-time enrolled, and less than 15% for home-schoolers). Home-schooling in a rural location, with potentially greater difficulty of access to resources, may lie beyond the financial means of many parents.

Even in what may be better-resourced urban settings, special needs and disabilities are overrepresented in flexi-schooled populations. This is particularly true of autism, serious emotional disability and PDD. Higher prevalence may link to a lack of school-based resources and expertise in some schools. At the same time, it is important to recognise that parents may choose to flexi-school in either rural or urban locations because they do not believe their child can cope with full-time school attendance, regardless of in-school adaptations and support.

Every study has limitations, and the authors recommend that certain findings pertaining to rural locations be interpreted with caution (see above notes). We might also note the much higher reported prevalence of pupil disability overall, above 22%, as compared to the official reported prevalence of 14% (NCES 2021). However, official figures relate only to children receiving special education services (under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)), not to all children with actual or suspected disability.

The study makes clear the availability of flexi-schooling in the US and gives strong evidence of perceived value to parents and children with disabilities. It would be difficult to prove that higher flexi-schooling demand and accommodation in the US, as compared with the UK, is attributable to a schooling system less equipped to meet need. Ofsted, as noted earlier, has made clear the significant shortfalls of SEND support in the UK, and has acknowledged a growing number of parents withdrawing children with SEND to home educate.

The US experience invites consideration of a schooling system that, in certain regions at least, allows greater flexibility in the meeting of individual need. It also dispels any notion of flexi-schooling being an arrangement suited to affluent and better educated parents. In fact, compared to parents of full-time enrolled children, parents of flexi-schoolers are *less likely* to be college graduates, own their own homes and have high incomes. And yet, as the survey demonstrates, they are much more likely to have a child with a special educational need or disability.

Schafer and Khan (2017): Headline findings from the NHES-PFI Survey (2012 data).

- Nearly 30% of flexi-schooled children in the US have a disability.
- More than 40% of rural flexi-schoolers have disabilities, compared to less than 15% of rural homeschoolers.
- In rural locations, AD(H)D is reported among more than 25% of the flexi-schooled population, compared to 11% in the full-time enrolled population and under 5% among homeschoolers.
- Across all settings together, the prevalence of autism is 125% higher among flexi-schooled children compared to those full-time enrolled.
- Across all settings together, the prevalence of orthopaedic disability, pervasive development disorder, and serious emotional disorder is around twice as high in the flexi-schooled population than the full-time enrolled population.

7. Conclusion

Flexi-schooling appears to be increasingly sought by parents of children with SEND (England) and ASN (Scotland), though evidence suggests many schools are reluctant to agree to the arrangement and its practice remains uncommon in England and Wales.

Parents may wish to flexi-school because they believe the school only partially meets their child's needs. In other cases, parents may request the arrangement because even with the best staff intentions and with multiple school-based accommodations, their child still experiences overwhelming challenges and crippling symptoms in the full-time school environment. A request for flexi-schooling does not necessarily imply criticism of a school's (or LA's) efforts in SEND support.

Many children with learning difficulties and disabilities are content in full-time school and are able, with appropriate support, to cope with academic and social challenges. But there is no evidence to suggest that the full-time school environment, with reasonable adjustments, provides optimal educational and developmental outcomes for *all children* with SEND.

Evidence from Ofsted shows flexi-schooling can work well for families and dispels any notion of code C (authorised) flexi-schooling absences being detrimental to a school's Ofsted inspection grade. Some Local Authorities in Scotland are actively supportive of flexi-schooling, and some schools and multi-academy trusts in England are accommodating a high proportion of children with SEND in such arrangements.

Recommendations

1. **Department for Education to issue comprehensive guidelines on flexi-schooling arrangements in its national guidance for schools.**

   Current DfE flexi-schooling guidelines are misleading. The DfE has issued its principal guidance in Elective Home Education (EHE) publications and describes the arrangement from the starting point of EHE, and with reference to children who remain mostly home educated. The Department does not describe situations where (1) a child enrolled in school is granted a flexi-schooling arrangement; (2) a child's learning is predominantly school-based; or (3) a child transitions from part-time school attendance in reception to a formal flexi-schooling arrangement on reaching compulsory school age.

2. **Department for Education to introduce a new attendance code for flexi-schooling.**

   The DfE has not issued an absence code that fully reflects the arrangement of flexi-schooling, and many schools may mistakenly believe that use of 'code C' (authorised absence) for flexi-schooling has a negative impact on Ofsted ratings. Current DfE guidance is potentially undermining schools' willingness to serve the best interests of all children with SEND.

3. **Government, UKRI and other institutional funders to support academic study of flexi-schooling children with SEND.**

   A stronger body of evidence on SEND flexi-schooling, examining parent motivations, best practice and outcomes, is needed to inform policy at the national and local level, and in turn reduce inequalities of access in the UK.

4. **Multi-agency consortium to produce national guidelines on flexi-schooling children with SEND.**

   Many Local Authorities, schools and parents would benefit from accessible guidelines informed and endorsed by national SEND charities, academic experts, schools and people with lived experience. Guidelines should aim to give both parents and schools confidence in flexi-schooling decision-making and planning.

   The Relationships Foundation has already received expressions of interest of support from national charities and experts in neurodiversity, disability and education to undertake this work. We are seeking funding and further partners to i) create interim guidelines from research undertaken to date; ii) create a more robust body of evidence to inform Local Authorities and schools; and iii) capture evidence of practices and relationships that are enabling children with SEND to thrive.

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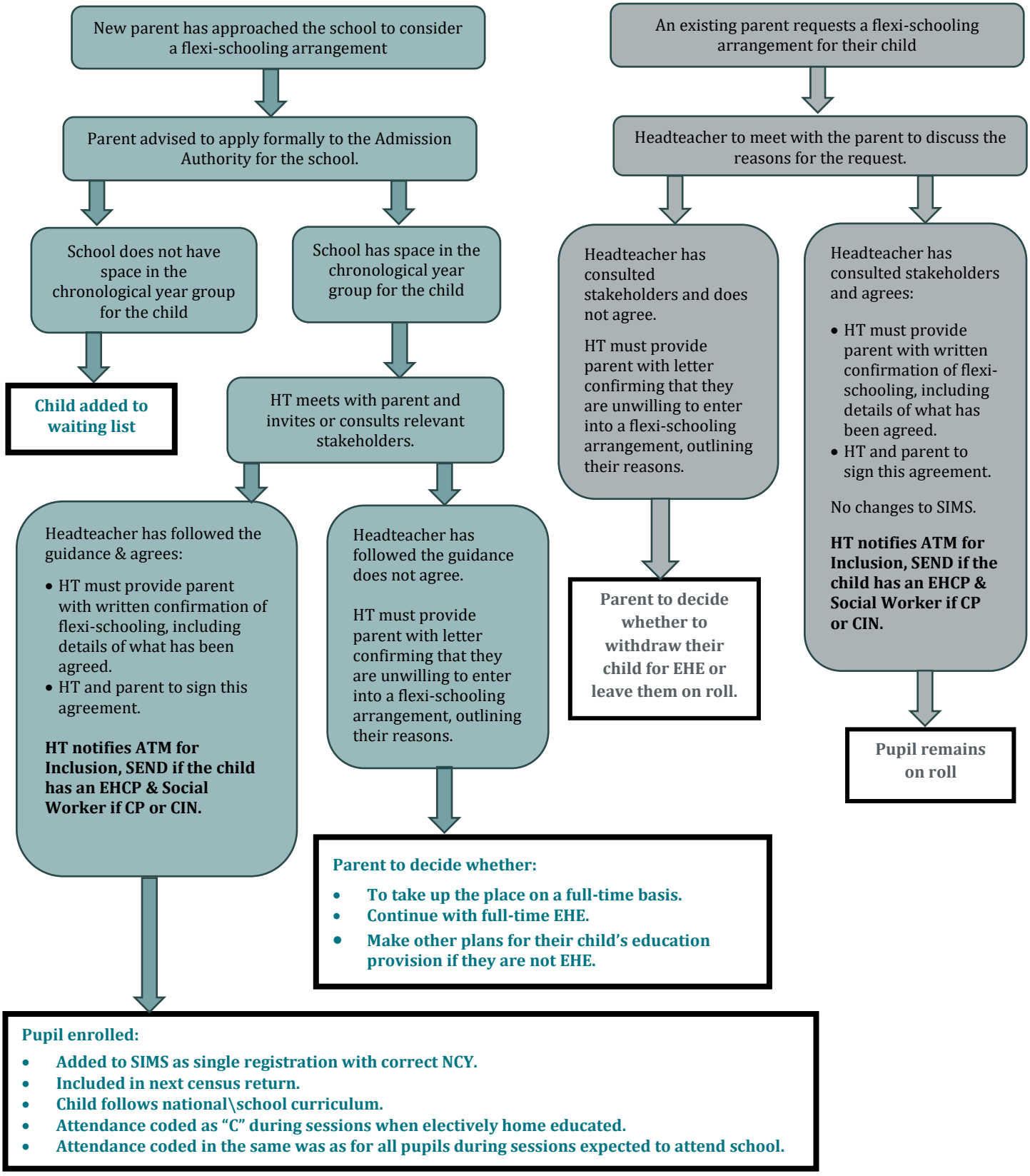
Appendix 1: Southampton City Council Flexi-schooling process flow chart



Source: Southampton City Council, 2020. Inclusion Services Flexi-Schooling Guidance

Appendix 2: Cornwall Council, Flexi-schooling checklist & agreement

This document to be retained by the school and parent

FLEXI-SCHOOLING REQUEST: Checklist and agreement	
Name of Child	
Date of birth	
Academic Year	
Parent/carer name	
Date when request was first made by parents	
Have the parents fully explained the exact details of the flexi-schooling arrangements they have in mind and the reasons behind their request? Are these reasons appropriate?	Record details Yes/No
Has the request been confirmed by the parents in writing and request stored on the child's file?	Yes/No
Is the school able to accommodate any concerns expressed by the parents within the parameters of full-time schooling?	Record details Yes/No
If the pupil has a Statement or EHC Plan, has the parent's request been referred to the Statutory SEN Team?	Yes/No/n/a
Does it appear likely that the request, if approved, would impose an additional workload on members of staff? What is the nature of this additional workload?	Record details Yes/No
Is the programme/activity proposed by the parents educational and appropriate? Have the parents produced any documentary evidence to support this? E.g. letters from other educational institutions, sporting academies, etc.	Record details Yes/No

Have the parents been made fully aware of their child's current and anticipated level of educational attainment and the potential impact which their request for flexi-schooling might have on this?	Record any issues specifically discussed Yes/No
Have the parents been made fully aware of any critical aspects of the curriculum/assessment/teaching in school which their child will miss if […] flexi-schooled?	Record details Yes/No
Should the school agree to the parents' request, have arrangements for monitoring and review been discussed and agreed? What timescales have been set? Has an initial review date been agreed?	Record details including date of initial review and proposed days of attendance Yes/No
Have the parents been made aware that the school has the right to withdraw any agreement it might make to flexi-schooling arrangements if it considers that the original intentions and expectations are not being met?	Yes/No
Should the school be unable to agree to the parent's request, have the reasons for this been fully explained and confirmed in writing and saved on the child's file?	Record details Yes/No
Have the parents been informed that their child will accrue absences (authorised for the periods of time they are flexi-schooled?)	Yes/No
DECISION	
Approved/Not Approved (delete as appropriate)	
Reason/Comment	
Signed: Headteacher	
Date	

Source: Cornwall Council 2017. Flexi-schooling Guidance for schools. September 2017. Children, Families and Adults Directorate.

Appendix 3: Considerations for a parent–school flexi-schooling agreement

Source: Gutherson & Mountford-Lees, 2011.

A parent–school agreement might cover the following:

- What days/sessions the child will or will not normally attend school, and if appropriate, over what period of time
- What flexibility there will be regarding special events which fall outside the normal arrangement, e.g. assemblies, trips, productions or performances, sports events, visitors to the school, etc.
- How the register will be marked
- That the parents must contact the school if the pupil is absent from a session that they would normally be present at school or at an approved educational activity
- That the school will follow up any unexpected or unexplained absence in the same way as it does for other pupils
- What the arrangement will be at times of pupils' assessment
- If parents choose to employ other people to educate their child at home, they will be responsible for making sure that those whom they engage are suitable to have access to children
- Any perceived special educational needs and associated provision
- Recommended regular planning meetings between parent and school to ensure the child achieves his/her potential and to promote good home-school relationships (to be agreed, e.g. termly)
- That the school will notify the local authority of the flexi-school arrangement and if it appears that the home-educated part of a flexi-school arrangement is not suitable, then the school and local authority will work in partnership to engage with the parents and resolve the concerns about the child's education
- That the school will inform the local authority if it appears the child is not receiving suitable full-time education
- Under what circumstances and with what notice either party can withdraw from the arrangement, including an exit strategy if appropriate
- How any disputes will be resolved (i.e. normal processes are for disputes to be resolved at the most informal level possible, but ultimately any complaints have to be considered by the headteacher first and then the governing body under the school's complaints procedures).

Appendix 4: General information and resources on flexi-schooling

1. The most recent Department for Education guidance on flexi-schooling is found in two Elective Home Education publications, one written for Local Authorities, the other for parents, both published in 2019. These can be accessed here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education

2. Some Local Authorities have issued guidance on flexi-schooling and added to national guidelines by setting out further details of the arrangement, LA expectations and established best practice. Examples include:

Local Authority	**Title**	**Link**
Cornwall Council, Children, Families and Adults Directorate (2017)	Flexi-schooling Guidance for schools.	https://cornwallsecondaryheads.co.uk/_documents/%5B210016%5Dflexi-schooling-guidance-2017-18.pdf
Gloucestershire County Council Services for Children with Additional Needs: Education Inclusion Service (2019)	Information for parents, carers, head-teachers and governors regarding flexible attendance at school (flexi-schooling)	https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2090231/svrshir160-lnutland-desktop-flexi_schooling_-info-revised-june-2019.pdf
Southampton City Council Inclusion Services 2020	Flexi-Schooling Guidance	https://www.youngsouthampton.org/Images/Guidance-for-schools-FINAL.docx
Aberdeenshire (Scotland)	Flexi-schooling guidance (in report to education & children's services committee – 3 December 2020 home education policy); Includes 'Draft' on Head Teacher Guidance	https://committees.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/FunctionsPage.aspx?dsid=105959&action=GetFileFromDB

3. **The Centre for Personalised Education** (https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk) provides flexi-schooling information for both parents and schools. Information is provided on web-pages and as leaflet downloads. These include topics of 'how does flexi-schooling work?' and 'negotiating with schools', and a leaflet for headteachers which addresses FAQ and flexi-schooling in practice.

4. The **Flexischooling Families UK Facebook group** has a membership of around 10,000 (as of December 2021). The group welcomes parents who want to know more about flexi-schooling or are in the process of applying for the arrangement, or who have arrangements currently. Many members have children with SEND and the group is run by very informed administrators. (https://www.facebook.com/groups/380046592033979/)

Appendix 5: List of cited and contacted Local Authorities

20/20health examined Local Authority flexi-schooling information online and additionally submitted 32 freedom of information requests to LAs in England and Wales to understand regional flexi-schooling policy, guidelines and data.

LA documentation reviewed (online access or LA correspondence)

1. Aberdeenshire Council (Scotland)
2. Fife Council (Scotland)
3. Cornwall Council
4. Devon County Council
5. Essex County Council
6. Gloucester County Council
7. Kirklees Council
8. Norfolk County Council
9. Northumberland County Council
10. Southampton City Council
11. Staffordshire County Council
12. Surrey County Council
13. Walsall Council
14. Wokingham Borough Council

Freedom of Information requests, England (respondents only)

1. Cumbria County Council
2. Derbyshire County Council
3. Gloucestershire County Council
4. Hertfordshire County Council
5. Kent County Council
6. Lancashire County Council
7. Leicestershire County Council
8. Lincolnshire County Council
9. London Borough of Lambeth
10. Royal Borough of Greenwich
11. Slough Borough Council
12. Staffordshire County Council
13. Suffolk County Council
14. Surrey County Council
15. Swindon Borough Council
16. Westminster City Council
17. West Northamptonshire Council
18. West Sussex County Council
19. Wiltshire Council

Freedom of Information requests, Wales (respondents only)

1. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
2. Ceredigion County Council
3. Conwy County Borough Council
4. Merthyr Tydfil
5. Monmouthshire County Council
6. Powys County Council
7. Swansea City and Borough Council
8. Vale of Glamorgan Council
9. Wrexham County Borough Council

Freedom of Information request, Scotland*

1. Fife Council

* FOIs on flexi-schooling were submitted to all Scottish Authorities in 2017/18 by DGPSG (2019) (see references). These are acknowledged in this review.

Freedom of Information request, Northern Ireland

1. Education Authority (EANI)

Appendix 6: Interviews and correspondence

Special thanks are due to the institutions and experts interviewed or consulted during this review. Their participation does not necessarily imply endorsement of views expressed within this report.

- Thomas Brayford: Education Policy and Parliamentary Officer, National Autistic Society
- Colin Foley: National Director of Training, ADHD Foundation
- Dr Clare Lawrence: Head of Participatory Autism Research, Bishop Grosseteste University; East Midlands Convenor for the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC)
- Dr Lila Kossyvaki, CPsychol Lecturer in Severe Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs, University of Birmingham
- PDA Society
- Lawrence Mahon: MA student in Autism and individual with lived experience of flexi-schooling
- Parents of children with SEND

20/20health is an independent, social enterprise think tank working to improve health through research, campaigning, networking and relationships. Its interest in flexi-schooling for children with SEND (or additional support/learning needs) stems from its work to protect children's mental, emotional and social health, and promote whole-school wellbeing.

The Relationships Foundation works with government, business, health and education to show how connectedness, belonging, mutual understanding, respect and shared goals are essential to thriving. It is a charity and social enterprise offering research, insight and strategic planning.