

We had our meeting with Pat Ward who explained that she was there as an impartial facilitator. She was only there to gather our views and to pass them along to the policy makers. We were assured that all our views and concerns would be taken into consideration.

The policy was broken up and we were given the chance to discuss each area. We began with the legislative background.

She made it clear that they are aware that we are completely within our rights to Home Educate but went on to quote Article 45 (original notes said '44' but I think this may be a typo) of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 to show why they feel that they have a responsibility for Home Educated children. The draft policy is an effort of the board to carry out their responsibilities.

Parents stated that we believed that they have misinterpreted the article and that it would result in a shift within the relationship between the board and home educators. She said that instead of the board taking a reactionary role to information that a child is not receiving an education they are instead taking a proactive role and in essence putting home education on trial. It was stated that this kind of policy would take a lot of money to implement and that the board lacked expertise in this area. The school environment is not comparable to home education and could not be assessed in the same way.

Pat was very open to our comments and summarised our views as being that we would prefer the board to have more of a supportive role (signposting) rather than being heavy handed. We agreed. She then asked us what kind of a role we would like the board to have and what information/resources we would like to get from them. We suggested that they provide information such as home education groups within the area, schools that were willing to allow home educated kids to participate in after school activities, exam preparation, books, bus passes and centres that would allow home educated students to take exams.

Everyone agreed that the Safeguarding part of the policy was misplaced.

As we went through the procedures it was stated that a school principal was given too much responsibility especially when their knowledge of home education would be limited. Other parts of the procedures were discussed at length. We questioned how someone would be able to assess whether or not a child is receiving an 'efficient full time education appropriate to his or her age, ability and aptitude' etc given the number of ways a child could be educated. It was stated that a parent knows their child best and how to help them learn. Pat said she was going to play devils advocate and asked what about children who are receiving no education. We replied that the ELB could not compensate for poor parenting. The majority of parents want the best for their children and will do everything they can to help them whether at home or in school, however, unfortunately there are a few parents who do not and they do not reach their full potential. It is more important to build a relationship of trust between the parents and the board.

Most of the meeting we spoke of examples of how this policy could not be implemented. Pat was already very aware of the things which we did not agree with. She said that they had a very big response so far with regards to the draft policy with correspondence, FOI's and responses to the consultation etc. She wanted to focus the meeting on the things that we thought the Board should be involved in. What kind of relationship home educators should have with the Board and how the

Board could improve it on their end. Each time we mentioned something that we didn't agree with in the policy she would bring it back again to the thing we mentioned at the beginning where we agreed that the board should not be heavy handed with home educators and that they should be there as a resource more than anything else.

We asked about the response to the focus groups. How many invites went out to home educators and how many responded. She told us that they wrote to all home educators that they knew about which averaged around 40 but they were only receiving about 10 responses. We told her that it was probably because of the exams happening right now and many home educators were concentrating on that and had to prioritise.

We attempted to give her a copy of the Lancashire Home Education Policy but she told us that she already had a copy and was familiar with it.

Overall the meeting went well. Pat was very open to our suggestions and really wanted to know how the Board could support Home Educators rather than alienate them.