



Make Sara Sharif's death mean something

Home education not to be blamed in the death of Sara Sharif.

We at Educational Freedom and the home educating families that we support are horrified at how quickly many in positions of power have decided to weaponise a child's tragic death. A child taken from this world at the young age of ten by the actions of evil murderers, who subjected her to a life of torture and abuse.

Sara Sharif deserves better than to be used as a political pawn. She suffered at the hands of abusers for her entire life. The blame for her death must and should fall squarely on those family members who should have taken care of her.

There should also be professional curiosity into why so many arms of the state failed her in her short life. Therefore, before responding with kneejerk reactions that infringe the freedoms of citizens acting lawfully, questions need to be asked and addressed of all the "professional" safeguarding actors that allowed Sara's torture and abuse to continue until ultimately, the hands of her family members killed her. Had those "professionals" intervened appropriately or made a different decision, it would have enabled her to be alive, safe, and thriving today.

We at Educational Freedom agree that lessons **MUST** be learned, but these need to be genuine lessons, not just words. Any actions by the state in response to Sara Sharif's death must be based on objective evidence, not on prejudice, bias and othering of families who happen to choose an alternative (home education) to the state's free offer of education, or worse still are home educating non-electively because the state has refused or failed to provide a genuine free offer of education to a child that is full-time, efficient and suitable to that child's age, ability, aptitude and SEN.

We were not surprised that the fact Sara was abused and tortured for 10 years was ignored by the Children's Commissioner and some members of the government as they jumped to blame home educators, in an attempt to justify their expensive to the public purse Children Not in School register. Despite many individuals and organisations (our own included) asking what issue they think this register will fix,



what is the objective reason for implementing it, these questions have never been meaningfully answered nor has supporting evidence been provided.

This is why proper professional curiosity needs to occur now. Sara lived in Surrey. Surrey already effectively operate a register. They call it an ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION RECORD, and Sara's name was on this. They also have EHE officers who undertake visits. This phrase is taken straight from their welcome to EHE letter *"We can confirm that your child has been added to the Elective Home Education Record that Surrey County Council hold. We have a team of EHE Inclusion Officers who undertake visits to our EHE families throughout the year."* Ignoring the phrasing which appears to infer that families are owned by the LA, this clearly demonstrates that a CNIS register would not have saved this child. The letter is publicly available at this link

https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/elective_home_education_175#incoming-2777010

So, the EHE staff could have done something, as Sara was on their record. Some reported information claims that she was not receiving an education. If that was the case and her parents were not providing a full-time efficient education suitable to her age, ability and aptitude, then she was not "home educated", she was a "child missing education". This should have been followed up with School Attendance Orders or Education Supervision Orders, measures already available to every LA under current legislation when a child is missing education / receiving an unsuitable education in a home education setting.

Whether Sara was on a school roll or home educated is a moot point in this particular case as she was brutally murdered in August, so even if she had still been on the school roll, school would not have been a protective factor as it was the standard school holidays. Equally, she was on a school roll for the majority of her compulsory school age, and what meaningful protective factor did that afford her? Sara was still being seriously harmed and not safeguarded.

This is a further question that needs professional curiosity and objective consideration. If a child is being subjected to significant harm for the majority of their time in the home, how is it acceptable to take the view that if the child gets a few hours' reprieve from that harm by being in school, it does not matter that they are sent back day in and day out to those families that are abusers? How does that protect the child's rights? It is a careful balancing act, but instead of wasting precious public funds on trying to unnecessarily and disproportionately interfere in law-abiding citizens' family lives, why not plough all that money into strengthening social services and their support teams, ensuring that they are sufficiently resourced to successfully safeguard children, so another tragedy like Sara Sharif's never occurs again?

Sara was known to social services for the full 10 years of her life; what actual safeguarding role were they taking? Safeguarding has two elements: protection and prevention. Where was the protection in her case? We hope the serious case review does not turn out like other safeguarding cases I am personally aware of. When she was deregistered to home education and the school sent their return to LA, they should have flagged their safeguarding reservations *immediately*. This would have meant that the allocated person didn't just check she was on the EHE list, but would instead have initiated an assessment about whether the removal from school to home education (when viewed in the round of *all* the information available to social services at that time about that child's life) met the s47 threshold.

If the s47 threshold is met, then it must be followed up, and appropriate actions must be put in place. It is not yet clear what happened at this crucial information point in Sara Sharif's case.

Her case had been heard in the Family Courts. What information was unavailable, or ineffectively presented so as to lead to her being left in the care of an abuser?

We hope that the legacy of Sara Sharif is that lessons are genuinely being learned and sufficient resourcing and funding are put into Local Authorities, ring-fenced to ensure social services departments are appropriately staffed and trained to enable them to meet all their statutory duties and their statutory supportive powers. And to ensure Sara's legacy is that an abuser will not be enabled to significantly harm another child.

Michelle Zaher 13/12/2024

Educational Freedom

www.educationalfreedom.org.uk