

Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 13th December 2023, 16:00-17:00, Sanctuary Buildings, London and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division, Department for Education

Attendees

- The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP - Minister of State for Schools
- Amanda Spielman - HM Chief Inspector **[AS]**
- Dame Rachel de Souza - Children's Commissioner **[RdS]**
- Julie McCulloch - Director of Policy deputising for Geoff Barton **[JM]**
- Leora Cruddas - Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts (CST) **[LC]**
- Matthew Cooke - Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads and Virtual School Head for Suffolk **[MC]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy - National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**
- Isabelle Trowler - Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**
- Lee Owston - Deputy Director for Schools and Education, Ofsted **[LO]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE - Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children **[PWa]**
- Sarah Clarke - Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South East of England Regional Steering Group Member **[SC]**
- Tina Emery - Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South West Regional Steering Group Member **[TE]**
- Paul Whiteman - General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers **[PWh]**
- Michael Robson - Northern Education Trust, Deputising for Rob Tarn **[MR]**
- Matt Cunningham - Policy Officer, ADCS, Deputising for John Pearce **[MC]**

Apologies

- Ade Adetosoye OBE - Children and Families Spokesperson, SOLACE

- Geoff Barton - General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Warren Carratt - Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi Academy Trust and The Evolve Trust
- John Pearce - President, Association of Directors of Children's Services
- Chief Constable Catherine Roper - National Police Chiefs' Council Lead Children and Young Person's Portfolio, Wiltshire Police
- Rob Tarn - CEO, Northern Education Trust
- Dr Rowena Christmas - GP Principle, Royal College of General Practitioners
- Anna Feuchtwang - Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau

Officials in Attendance

Official attendees updated to include only the names of Senior Civil Servants in attendance [February 2024]

- Simone Bayes - Deputy Director, Mental Health Delivery [**SB**]
- Elizabeth Franey - Deputy Director, SENDAP [**EF**]
- Matthew Hopkinson - Deputy Director, Life Skills Division [**MH**]
- Matthew Hopkinson - Deputy Director, Life Skills Division [**MH**]
- Juliette Cammaerts - Children's Commissioner's Office [**JC**]
- Officials from Attendance Division and Strategic Communications and Campaigns (**SCC**)

1. Welcome from Simon Blake

Owner: Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division [**SB**]

SB welcomed Alliance members to the meeting.

SB noted it is **AS's** last Alliance meeting as her term at Ofsted comes to an end and thanked her for her important work as an Alliance member.

SB welcomed Minister Hinds to his first Alliance meeting as Schools Minister. **Minister Hinds** expressed his appreciation for the valuable work being done by the Alliance. He offered his view that if children aren't in school, little else being done in schools will work. This includes social development, safeguarding, and more. **Minister Hind's** emphasised that attendance is a top priority for him and that he looks forward to hearing the discussion today.

2. Communications campaign and core messages

Owner: Strategic Communications and Campaigns official [**SCC**]

SCC shared that the Department's local authority communications work was being well received. Feedback from parent focus groups will be incorporated into future communications plans. Officials are also working closely with headteachers, and local authorities have expressed interest in being involved.

SCC reiterated that Alliance member support across different sectors is important for reaching parents and children.

Action: For next comms moment (January) relevant members to support social media plans (eg, by participating in video explaining why attendance matters).

RdS explained her office has been hearing from children on what they think is important through The Big Ambition survey (closing 19 January) and underlined the importance of children's voices.

Action: RdS to share responses to her office's survey that relate to attendance with the Alliance.

3. The importance of belonging for supporting school attendance

Owner: Amanda Spielman - HM Chief Inspector [AS]

AS presented on the theme of belonging for supporting school attendance, through the lens of the Ofsted inspection framework. **AS** emphasised her view that belonging brings together a range of areas of critical importance to school performance:

- It is important to minimise any factors that disrupt children's time in school
- The main classroom is the primary location for fostering belonging.
- Children thrive when there is clarity, clear expectations and routines.
- Belonging should be for everyone as a whole school approach. SEND support is critical for the children that need it.
- Staff burdens are a key concern.

MH outlined the Department's approach to belonging, centred around a safe, calm, supportive school environment

TE emphasised that the Department's SENDAP work is really important but legislative changes will take time; in the meantime children who require extra support must be able to access it.

RV highlighted the importance of the psychology of belonging, emphasising two elements: learning and the social side. Both have been affected by COVID and are interconnected. Climate interventions can make a difference and primary-to-secondary transition support is important.

Action: officials to consider scope to highlight belonging and transition from primary to secondary in attendance good practice (e.g. future webinars).

RdS thanked **PF** for the work that the Anna Freud Centre is doing and praised their PEARS Family School as a good example of alternative provision creating a culture of

belonging. **RdS** added the need to accelerate assessments for children who are struggling to get their needs in mainstream schools, or special schools if needed.

MC stressed the importance for schools to prioritise belonging as a metric, not just within the classroom but also extra-curricular activities and services, to ensure families feeling more connected to schools, He suggested virtual schools can support schools in this.

JM flagged the constraint of resources, recognising the limited remit of schools to deliver services and activities beyond the classroom.

PF agreed with **AS** that social networking is a key function of schools, connecting to others like us in secondary school. If we can make it part of policy to make networks easier, it could prevent a child from adversity.

Minister Hinds thanked members for the insightful discussion. He identified three key areas in the discussion on belonging: Firstly, being happy at school is fundamental for children, and there are a whole range of things other than lessons that make children want to be in school, such as music, sports, and friends as mentioned by **PF**, secondly, a sense of identity and thirdly, family connectedness as mentioned by **MC**.

Action: Raise the theme of belonging with Attendance Hub Leads.

4. Closing remarks

Owner: Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division [SB]

SB thanked **AS** and all members for a productive discussion and their continued support with the Department comms campaign. The next meeting is scheduled for 17th January.