

Attendance Action Alliance

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

Chair

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education

Attendees

- Ade Adetosoye CBE - Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- Amanda Spielman - HM Chief Inspector **[AS]**
- Dame Rachel de Souza - Children's Commissioner **[RDS]**
- Isabelle Trowler - Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**
- John Pearce - President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) **[JP]**
- 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]**
- Michael Robson - Northern Education Trust, deputising for Rob Tarn **[MR]**
- Paul Stride - Portfolio Coordinator, Metropolitan Police deputising for Catherine Roper **[PS]**
- Paul Whiteman - General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers **[PW]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy - National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Rowena Christmas - Chair, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), deputising for Professor Dame Clare Gerada **[RC]**
- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE - Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) **[PW]**
- Tina Emery - Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer Forums & South West of England Regional Steering Group Member **[TE]**
- Warren Carratt - Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi Academy Trust & The Evolve Trust **[WC]**

Apologies

- Anna Feuchtwang - Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau **[AF]**

- Chief Constable Catherine Roper - Chief Constable, NPCC CYP Portfolio, Met Police **[CR]**
- Geoff Barton - General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) **[GB]**
- Rob Tarn CBE - CEO, Northern Education Trust (NET) **[RT]**
- Sarah Clarke - Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South East of England Regional Steering Group Member **[SC]**

Officials in Attendance

- Sophie Taylor - Director, Vulnerable Children Strategy and Educational Engagement
- Katherine Cowell - Regional Director, North East **[KC]**
- Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division **[SB]**
- Will Bickford-Smith - Special Advisor to Secretary of State **[WBS]**
- Mark Lehain - Special Advisor to Secretary of State **[ML]**
- Katie Smith - Private Secretary to Secretary of State **[KS]**
- Juliette Cammaerts **[JC]**, Alice Wilcock **[AW]** - Children's Commissioner's Office, attending in addition to Children's Commissioner.
- Officials from Attendance Division **[AD]**, Strategic Communications and Campaigns and Regions Group.

1. Welcome from Secretary of State

Owner: The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education.

Secretary of State began with a reminder of the importance of it being anti-bullying week this week.

Secretary of State acknowledged the departure of the Rt Hon Nick Gibb from the role of Schools Minister. She emphasised her gratitude for the enormous impact he had made in the role and wished him luck for the next step in his career.

Secretary of State shared the attendance data for the start of the 23/24 academic year, noting the importance of the Department and the Alliance continuing with efforts to tackle absence.

2. Regional Operating Models

Owner: Katherine Cowell – Regional Director, North East **[KC]**

KC described the Department for Education's regional approaches to increasing attendance including the central place of the issue in Regions Group's work, which manifested in a range of different ways. She noted emerging evidence of role of the Working Together guidance in driving operational improvements on attendance response at LA level, but the need to go further on strategic ownership of the issue including with partners in health and justice.

KC explained that, as noted in previous meetings, a small number of local Attendance Action Alliances (LAAAs) are being trialled with different formats to identify what works and measure outcomes.

RdS emphasised the need for clarity of outcomes, getting right partners involved, (including from services beyond education) and clear accountability for raising attendance.

AS said that clear accountability was vital: roles and responsibilities across the system needed careful thought including the role of MATs in shaping a place-based attendance strategy.

Action: Officials and the Children's Commissioner to encourage local partnerships, as they are developed, to identify success measures.

RC is working to embed the GP principles to support children to attend school regularly. GPs have experienced difficulty encouraging children to attend in some cases, particularly neurodiverse children who need additional support from schools.

Secretary of State agreed and highlighted that the Department's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan aims to provide support for neurodiverse children.

JP shared that from his experience as a Director of Children's Service (DCS), improvements require the system to work together. **JP** highlighted that in Durham he is bringing together system leaders to drill down into and address local challenges.

MC suggested involving virtual school heads (VSHs) into local partnerships in order to keep children with a social worker in focus. Some practice in the East of England shows there is strength in pooling information as VSHs.

Action: Officials to identify ways to include VSHs in regional work.

JM believes that it is powerful that the Alliance brings together different agencies to tackle attendance and emphasised the need to work collaboratively with schools.

MR emphasised that most school leaders have attendance on their development plan. **MR** has experienced strong support from some local authorities and endorsed making the *Working together* guidance statutory to drive greater consistency.

TE cautioned against efforts that inadvertently drive an increase in SEND and mental health diagnostic requests. Instead, the focus in schools should be needs-led.

RV suggested further analysis of variance in attendance to understand where intervention is needed.

Action: Officials to look at MAT level data to further understand at what level attendance can be improved.

PS highlighted that he is already encouraging strategic relationships and buy-in within the police.

AS highlighted that Ofsted Regional Directors could support the Local AAAs by offering a regional level perspective.

Action: Officials to consider how to feed in a range of intelligence, including Ofsted Regional Directors' perspectives, into local activity.

3. Comms Campaign Update

Owner: Attendance Division official **[AD]**

Secretary of State handed over to **AT** to present the Department's comms plan for attendance for the 2023-2024 academic year.

AD explained that the Department's daily attendance data shows how absence plays out over an academic year. **AD** explained that the Department has used yearly trends and key events to develop attendance communications focus for each term.

RdS agrees with the summer term focus on transitions and emphasised that communications should focus on this before Easter to ensure a September output. **RdS** supported a push of back-to-school communications in January.

AS thought study leave for GCSE pupils was an area worth understanding better.

PS offered to share the Department's comms messaging on the Police UK Instagram account.

PW said that the NSPCC has a newsletter which can be used to amplify messages.

LC offered to help elevate communications messaging to the trust sector. **LC** also noted that the message in **RdS's** recent report that it is never too late for children to turn it around when it comes to attendance and attainment is really important.

Secretary of State agreed that this is an incredibly important message that will give children and young people further motivation to attend school.

PF will share the messages through the Anna Freud communication channels.

Action: Officials to update comms plan to include additional focuses raised by Alliance members.

Action: **PS, PF, PW** and **LC** to share core messages through identified routes and all members to support with promoting the Department's comms messaging to their sectors.

4. Closing remarks

Owner: The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education.

Secretary of State thanked Alliance members for their contributions and for continuing to progress their actions. The next meeting is scheduled for December.