

Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 18th October 2023, 14:00-15:00, Sanctuary Buildings, London and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools.

Attendees

- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy - National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Paul Stride - Portfolio Coordinator, Metropolitan Police deputising for Catherine Roper **[PS]**
- Michael Robson - Northern Education Trust, deputising for Rob Tarn **[MR]**
- Amanda Spielman - HM Chief Inspector **[AS]**
- John Pearce - President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) **[JP]**
- Tina Emery - Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer Forums & South West of England Regional Steering Group Member **[TE]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE - Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) **[PW]**
- Ade Adetosoye CBE - Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- Anna Feuchtwang - Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau **[AF]**
- Julie McCulloch - Director of Policy deputising for Geoff Barton **[JM]**
- Warren Carratt - Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi Academy Trust & The Evolve Trust **[WC]**
- Matthew Cooke - Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads and Virtual School Head for Suffolk **[MC]**
- Rowena Christmas - Chair, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), deputising for Professor Dame Clare Gerada **[RC]**
- Leora Cruddas - Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts (CST) **[LC]**
- Richard Gill- CEO, The Arthur Terry Learning Partnership **[RG]**

Apologies

- Dame Rachel de Souza - Children's Commissioner **[RDS]**
- Rob Tarn CBE - CEO, Northern Education Trust (NET) **[RT]**
- Geoff Barton - General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) **[GB]**
- Chief Constable Catherine Roper – Chief Constable, NPCC CYP Portfolio, Met Police **[CR]**
- Isabelle Trowler - Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada - President, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) **[CG]**
- Paul Whiteman - General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers **[PW]**
- Sarah Clarke - Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South East of England Regional Steering Group Member **[SC]**

Officials in Attendance

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

- Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division **[SB]**
- Juliette Cammaerts **[JC]**, Peter Holland, Alice Wilcock - Children's Commissioner's Office - attending in addition to Children's Commissioner.
- Will Bickford-Smith - Special Advisor to Secretary of State **[WBS]**
- Simone Bayes - Deputy Director, Mental Health Delivery **[SB2]**
- Officials from Strategic Communications and Campaigns **[SCC]** and Attendance Division **[AD]**

1. Welcome from Minister Gibb

Owner: The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools.

The Minister welcomed members and thanked those who attended the Attendance Action Alliance meeting at Number 10 in September. The Minister thanked members for the work being carried out across the Alliance and highlighted its importance.

The Minister announced that Professor Dame Clare Gerada is retiring as President of the Royal College of General Practitioners and, as such, is leaving the Alliance. The Minister thanked **CG** for the two years she has served as a member Alliance. The Minister underlined the importance of the link between school attendance, health and equalities, and welcomed continued work with Dr Rowena Christmas while discussions continue with the Royal College of General Practitioners on a successor.

The Minister asked Simon Blake [**SB**] to update on the actions from the last meeting.

SB provided the update:

- Two of the actions from the previous meeting are closed and five are ongoing.
- A request has been made for the Secretary of State to meet with health leaders.
- Tess Valley Local Attendance Action Alliance has met this academic year already; other local alliances are planning their meeting dates. An update will be provided on these in the November AAA meeting. **SB** thanked Rachel de Souza for agreeing to sponsor local alliances this academic year.
- Amanda Spielman has given a speech on attendance and Leora Cruddas ran a successful Confederation of School Trusts (CST) conference, with the theme of belonging
- Officials in the Department met with the School and Public Health Nurses Association to discuss what school nurses can do to support work to increase school attendance.
- 14 attendance hubs have been launched and are now supporting around 90 schools. This includes the first special school to be supported by an attendance hub. **SB** thanked Warren Carratt for his work supporting this. 400,000 pupils are within the attendance hubs and these will be scaled further to reach more pupils this year.
- The Department is reviewing the recommendations from the Education Select Committee report and is working to produce a policy response. The Minister commented that he takes the recommendations seriously.

Action - Officials to provide an update on the Local Attendance Action Alliances at the next AAA meeting in November.

2. Communications campaign update

Owner: Attendance Division official [**AD**], Department for Education, and Strategic Communications and Campaigns official [**SCC**], Department for Education.

The Minister handed over to **AD** and **SCC** to talk about Department for Education communications regarding attendance, who explained that the Department will be planning a variety of messaging across the academic year and would be grateful to test the messaging with Alliance members as it is developed. **AD** thanked Alliance Members who have already tested and provided input on the tone of any messaging.

SCC then talked through the channels for the dissemination of upcoming media.

Channels would be expanded as more messaging is developed.

The Minister welcomed (appropriately sensitive) communications on anxiety, highlighting that being away from school can exacerbate - as much as attending school can help to ease – anxiety in pupils.

TE highlighted that it may be worth explicitly setting out the audience for whom any messaging is intended, such as those with occasional absence, or parents who take term time holidays. It is important that families do not feel unfairly targeted. **TE** suggested that the communications should also point to support available.

PW highlighted the risks of a general approach that cannot target all family situations. **PW** highlighted that there are some parents and schools who will agree with the sentiment of the messaging, but the reality of their circumstances will prevent them from engaging.

RC set out that the communications should take account of neurodiversity. **RC** emphasised that communications should acknowledge this and take a support first approach.

RG suggested that any campaigns should be followed-up by providing materials for schools to use.

AF endorsed the comments raised by **RC** and **TE**.

Action: Officials to consider Alliance members' feedback to ensure stakeholder engagement and campaign messaging is completely clear about whom it is targeting, and that it includes referral to support where possible.

Action: Officials to bring communications back to a future alliance meeting.

Action: Alliance members to continue to support the development and dissemination of communication materials.

3. Wellbeing and absence

Owner: Russell Viner [**RV**] - Chief Scientific Advisor, the Department for Education, and Professor Peter Fonagy [**PF**] - National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England.

The Minister handed over to **RV** and **PF** to present jointly on research they have conducted into the relationship between mental health and absence.

RV described his early findings which indicate that there is a causal link between mental health problems and absence for children and young people, with later absence leading to increased likelihood of mental health issues and a reverse association the other way.

RV handed over to **PF** who talked through some of the ways in which Mental Health

Support Teams have supported children - including new training for educational mental health practitioners on school anxiety in the revised training programme - as well as strategies schools can employ to support children to attend.

PF noted that in addition to targeted interventions, a calm, safe and supportive school environment is important for increasing confidence and attendance for all children, including those with mental health challenges. **PF** highlighted that this is important for creating a predictable school environment for children.

AS commented that there needs to be consistency in applying rules, and how any changes to rules will be perceived by the pupils.

JM shared some messages from headteachers which highlighted difficulties in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) systems, as well as some of the situations which are playing out in schools.

WC talked about the inter-dependencies between local authorities and early help services and raised the point that schools struggle to make reasonable adjustments when compared with standard behaviour protocols. **WC** also highlighted that 'reasonable adjustments' is not language that is usually used in schools.

The Minister asked about the effectiveness of behaviour guidance for schools in ensuring they are applying reasonable adjustments appropriately.

Action: Officials to consider the guidance's coverage of reasonable adjustments.

JC mentioned that an addition to the research could involve looking at severe absence, and whether mental health problems get better when the child goes back to school.

Action: **RV** and **PF** to consider whether this additional research is possible.

TE mentioned that staff retention in Mental Health Support Teams is a challenge. **TE** highlighted bullying as one of the issues that can lead to mental health issues amongst children.

AF raised that an assessment of school provisions for wellbeing is missing from current Ofsted inspections. There needs to be a whole school approach to wellbeing to create good attainment.

AS mentioned that Ofsted do look qualitatively at provision for wellbeing and that it is already in the scope of the Ofsted inspection framework.

AS highlighted that two contradictory strands have been raised in the discussion, one around individualisation and addressing a particular child's needs and another around the whole-school approach, creating a predictable environment that all schools should create. **AS** suggested that the Alliance will need to support the Department to inform policy and support schools in a way that recognises the appropriate balance of these two strands.

Action: AS to revisit this theme at the December Alliance meeting, which will discuss the theme of belonging.

Action: Officials to continue to work closely with the Department for Health and Social Care to support schools on mental health and wellbeing, including on specialist provision and updates to attendance and mental health guidance.

Action: Officials to consider with **RV** and **PF** the possibility of publishing the research presented.

Action: Officials to share with the Alliance the new tools DfE has commissioned: a resources hub for senior mental health leads and a toolkit on pastoral support, both produced by the Anna Freud Centre and expected to go live this term.

4. Closing remarks

Owner: Simon Blake [**SB**] - Deputy Director, Attendance Division, Department for Education.

SB said that the Alliance will continue discussing the communications campaign in the next meeting. **SB** thanked Alliance Members for the thoughtful discussion and announced that the next meeting is scheduled for November and will focus on local variation.

SB brought the meeting to a close.