



Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 5th September 2023, 14:00-15:00, No 10 Downing Street, London and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan, Secretary of State for Education

Attendees

- The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for Schools
- Warren Carratt, Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi Academy Trust & The Evolve Trust **[WC]**
- Rowena Christmas, Chair Royal College of General Practitioners Wales deputising for Dame Clare Gerada **[RC]**
- Sarah Clarke, Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and East of England Regional Steering Group Member **[SC]**
- Matthew Cooke, Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads and Virtual School Head for Suffolk **[MC]**
- Leora Cruddas, Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts **[LC]**
- Tina Emery, Co-chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South West of England Regional Steering Group Member **[TE]**
- Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner **[DRS]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy, National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Richard Gill, CEO, Arthur Terry Learning Partnership deputising for Isabelle Trowler **[RG]**
- Julie McCulloch, Director of Policy, Association of School and College Leaders deputising for Geoff Barton **[JM]**
- John Pearce, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services **[JP]**
- Chief Constable Catherine Roper, National Police Chiefs' Council Lead Children and Young Person's Portfolio, Wiltshire Police **[CR]**
- Amanda Spielman, HM Chief Inspector, Ofsted **[AS]**
- Rob Tarn, CEO, Northern Education Trust **[RT]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE, Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children **[PWa]**
- Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers **[PW]**
- Russell Viner, Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**

Apologies

- Professor Dame Clare Gerada, President, Royal College of General Practitioners
- Ade Adetosoye OBE, Children and Families Spokesperson, SOLACE
- Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families
- Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive, National Children's Bureau
- Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

Officials in attendance

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

- Graham Archer, Interim Director General, Families Group **[GA]**
- Simon Blake, Deputy Director, Attendance Division **[SB]**
- David Simpson, Head of Families Analysis Division, Early Years, Childcare, Families and Analysis Directorate **[DS]**
- Attendance Division officials
- Katie Smith, Private Secretary to Secretary of State
- Julliette Cammaerts and Alice Wilcock- Children's Commissioner's Office

1. Welcome from Secretary of State

Owner: The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan, Secretary for Education

The Secretary of State (SoS) welcomed the attendees underlining her personal commitment as well as Government's to improving attendance in 2023/24, and that she sees the Alliance as a key part of efforts to reduce absence in schools. SoS thanked Alliance members for their support during the last academic year.

SoS addressed the issue of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) and gave the group an opportunity to share short reflections. The priority was to remain laser-focused on the overall attendance strategy.

SoS set out three key priorities for members for AY23/24:

- 1) To help mobilise their workforce/sectors around the attendance challenge and ensure it is a top priority by regularly and publicly talking about the importance of attendance – across the year at key touchpoints, including to influence parents;
- 2) To continue to help to improve attendance by using supporting systems and services to address underlying drivers of absence, particularly for vulnerable cohorts; and
- 3) To deliver on the pledges of action that the members have been working up with the officials.

SoS emphasised the government's strong focus on the issue this academic year. She encouraged Alliance members to do even more together in partnership to support attendance and to show leadership – building on areas of progress like hubs, the new parental comms toolkit and the CMO letter. She highlighted the importance of driving more action and asked for collective agreement on this.

SoS welcomed two new Alliance members, Matthew Cooke and Warren Carratt.

2. Absence overview and priorities for Academic Year (AY) 23/24

Owner: Simon Blake and David Simpson, Department for Education

SoS asked Simon Blake and David Simpson to present this item, including drawing out implications of the data for priorities for the group for the 23/24 academic year.

Key findings from the 22/23 academic year included:

- Full year daily attendance data for 22/23 shows we are making progress towards pre-pandemic attendance levels in key areas. The overall absence and non-attendance rate declined significantly 21/22 to 22/23, across all phases.
- Progress has been driven by authorised absence, which fell across phases and for pupils eligible for Free School Meals and/or with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP). Overall absence improved in all regions beside London, compared to the previous year. There were though increases in absence for children with Special Education Needs (SEN) Support and in London (though it was the lowest absence region).
- There remain significant challenges. Unauthorised absence increased across phases – particularly in secondary schools - and among vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups. Among FSM eligible pupils and those receiving SEN Support or an EHCP there are early indications that persistent absence increased in 22/23. Children in Need (CiN) attendance data remains problematic.
- Caution is needed in interpreting the data, and some of these trends may be softened once authoritative Census data is available. Comparison of autumn 22 daily attendance data and the Census suggest that the former slightly overstates absence and persistent absence. Plus there still appears to be inconsistent coding around absence being authorised or unauthorised.
- The underlying causes of these remaining challenges are complex- spanning changed attitudes, the effectiveness of the attendance system, and pressures on wider services tackling underlying drivers. The government has a comprehensive programme and ambitious plans to go further – including in areas like scaling attendance hubs and continued implementation of new attendance expectations in *Working Together to Improve School Attendance*, further regional and local focus including piloting local AAAs, parental communications, engaging workforces and rolling out SEND, mental health, and CSC reforms. The lesson of the data was the need for multiagency approaches, local tailoring and a continued focus on cohorts.
- There is a need to go further and the ask of the AAA members, alongside further government action, was to continue to mobilise workforces on attitudes and illness, and deliver pledges to drive a more effective attendance system and underlying services. There were themes around support and hubs, Children in Need and children with SEND, engaging health and wider workforces, and a place-based approach.

3. Discussion on key pledges made by the Alliance members in the 2023/24 Academic Year and AAA views on the assessment of challenges and overall approach

Owner: All members

SoS opened the discussion, asking whether members agreed with the areas of challenge and inviting members to talk about how their pledges for AY 23/24 will meet them.

RDS talked about her regional findings during roundtables she conducted over the summer. She stressed the importance of cross-sector engagement at regional level. She noted the different degrees to which local workforces engaged in solving the attendance issue - with some very involved and looking at data closely, and others not using data at all.

PWa talked about the need for local services to work together. He highlighted that there is a need for more safeguarding rigour in how attendance issues are approached locally.

PF commented that sometimes macro problems require micro solutions. Thinking about attendance at a more local level is paramount, but PF recognised that more work was needed locally to align health resource to the attendance problem. He felt health professionals could contribute a lot of the agenda. It was noted that Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) would be crucial here.

RV commented on the need to go further in analysing the attendance data, for example linking NHS child survey data to the national pupil database. RV noted that children feeling a sense of belonging in school was an important part of ensuring a child or young person attends school well. He also talked about the link between illness absence and unauthorised absence and commented that in some instances school nurse support would be beneficial to children. RV drew a parallel with NHS approaches to communicating with parents, citing language used around missed medical appointments and how this might drive behaviour change around school absence.

JP agreed with RV that data sharing is key to allow a clear assessment of children who need support most, particularly at a local level. JP agreed with RDS, PF and RV that more local visibility of attendance data is required, and translating that into action on the ground is key. He felt the place based format was crucial.

SB mentioned the pilot of the Local Attendance Action Alliances seeking to test effective cross workforce local operating models on attendance and felt AAA membership support of those Alliances would be crucial.

Action- Highlights from RDS roundtable discussions should be included in a wider AAA discussion later in the year about effective regional operating models (including data sharing), which can then be shared across the country. This should also include

consideration of how best to align health resource to the attendance problem.

Action- SoS to meet with health leaders to discuss data sharing arrangements between DfE and NHS, the role of ICBs in supporting attendance, and other opportunities to collaborate (e.g. on mild illness guidance and communications to parents).

Action: DfE officials to engage with school nursing representatives to understand better how this group might be better mobilised to support the attendance agenda. Ideas should be shared with the Alliance for discussion.

Action- John Pearce and the Children's Commissioner to support DfE work on Local Attendance Action Alliance pilots over the next six months.

LC noted that attendance is a complex problem that requires a sustained effort to solve over a sustained period of time. She agreed with RV on the theme of belonging being important. She felt research into parental attitudes towards attendance was hugely helpful in understanding a parent's point of view and should be shared widely. She also supported the idea that a feeling of belonging is key to improving attendance.

AS stressed the importance of getting the health messaging right. She talked about the role of schools in ensuring that schools are viewed as safe and comfortable place to be by changing the culture and expectations.

Action- AS to continue highlight the importance of attendance through public speeches.

SC highlighted that most parents want their child to attend school well. She commented that a few small changes could contribute to a child's sense of belonging and make a big difference on how a child feels about school, particularly those with SEND and/or who were neurodiverse. Examples included support around transitions, giving timetables to children earlier, and making transport more accessible for pupils with SEND.

Action- AS to continue highlight the importance of attendance through public speeches.

Action- LC to support DfE in sharing and promoting with schools best practice ways to communicate with parents – by highlighting the parent comms toolkit and by identifying and show casing schools who are already doing this brilliantly.

Action- Ensure a future Alliance meeting is dedicated to discussing the theme of belonging (including how that interacts with the whole school approach and individualised responses) and communicating effectively with parents.

RT highlighted that there is a need for further work on disadvantaged pupils and their attendance as well as their attainment, which wasn't always about regional disparity.

4. Closing remarks

Owner: The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan, Secretary for Education

Minister Gibb welcomed the discussion including the insights on belonging and timetables. Minister Gibb commented on the variations in the regional data, especially London, where attainment is often high. He also highlighted his interest in the role that school nurses can play.

SoS concluded the meeting by thanking attendees for the discussion and their pledges of action in the coming school year, to help reduce absence in schools.

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