

## Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2023, 15:00-16:00, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings and virtually via MS Teams.

### Chair

The Rt Hon Claire Coutinho, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

### Attendees

- Ade Adetosoye OBE – Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- Warren Carratt- Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi academy Trust and The Evolve Trust **[WC]**
- Sarah Clarke- Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[SC]**
- Leora Cruddas- Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts **[LC]**
- Tina Emery – Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[TE]**
- Anna Feuchtwang – Chief Executive of the National Children’s Bureau **[AE]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy- National Clinical Advisor on Children’s Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Dame Christine Lenehan- Director, The National Children’s Bureau **[CL]**
- Amanda Spielman – HM Chief Inspector, OFSTED **[AS]**
- Isabelle Trowler- Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**
- Chief Constable Catherine Roper- National Police Chiefs’ Council Children and Young People Portfolio Lead **[CCR]**
- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**
- Alice Wilcock- Head of Education, Children’s Commissioner Office **[AW]**
- Juliette Cammaerts- Director, Policy, Planning & Delivery, Children’s Commissioner’s Office **[JC]**

### Apologies

- Professor Dame Clare Gerada-President, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP)
- John Pearce – President, Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS)

- Sir Peter Wanless CBE- Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
- Paul Whiteman- General Secretary, National Association of Head teachers (NAHT)

## 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]**
- Officials from Attendance Division **[AD]**
- Tessa Farmer- Private Secretary to Minister Coutinho
- Elizabeth Franey- Deputy Director, Specialist Provision, Assessment and Family Experience Division **[EF]**

## 1. Welcome from Minister Coutinho

**Owner:** The Rt Hon Claire Coutinho, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing  
The Minister reflected on the progress made by the Alliance in this academic year, thanking members for their commitment and hard work, and noting the latest milestone of agreement by the Royal College of GPs of attendance principles. The Minister also highlighted the need for going further to restore attendance to pre-pandemic levels.

## 2. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

**Owner:** Attendance Division official, Department for Education

The Minister highlighted that the data shows that children with SEND (and particularly Social Emotional and Mental Health need) tend to have worse attendance than their peers. The Minister invited Attendance Division official to present this item.

Key findings included:

- Pupils with SEN support and EHCPs have higher absence rates compared to pupil with no identified SEN and a higher proportion of pupils with SEN were persistently and severely absent, both pre and post COVID.
- Absence varies widely by type of need but, across all SEN types, absence is higher in secondary school
- Across all SEN types of absence is driven by authorized absence – illness.
- Overall, unauthorised absence is higher in special schools compared to all schools, but this is driven by high unauthorised absence among pupils in 3 groups (inc. those
- with SEMH). Among most types of need, unauthorised absence is lower in

special schools.

- Absence is higher among girls with SEN than boys in secondary schools but a higher number of boys have SEN.

**TE** highlighted that girls with SEND are trickier to identify and diagnose. TE suggested it would be helpful to have a specific Mental Health absence code. It is important to support families who are struggling so they feel that they have the support they need. Extra support should be offered from the day the child is suspected to have SEND and not the day of diagnosis.

Minister Coutinho mentioned that some parts of the absence we are seeing are residue of COVID anxiety.

**TE** further explained that absence is driven by various factors. The discussion touched upon reasonable adjustments, communication between schools and children, and mapping out the needs and barriers.

**Action-** DfE to share the cross border working guidance with Children's Commissioners' Office for further feedback.

**CL** commented that communication between schools and parents is very important. CL stressed the need for clarity on when and how to use reasonable adjustments and that sometimes using those is not the right thing to do but instead clear expectations should be set.

**PF** stressed the importance of mental health support teams and recognising and responding to children's anxiety to reduce absence by using reasonable adjustments when appropriate.

**WC** noted the need for making all schools aware that all local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure there is an educational offer for children deemed medically too unwell to attend school. This would ensure that children who are too ill to attend school can continue learning.

**JC** mentioned the need for wider engagement in school beyond just the basic curriculum. Things like sport clubs, after school activities can help to encourage children to come into school. JC also stressed the importance of health and education sectors working together.

**RV** talked about the relationship between health and education.

**Action-** Russell to help spread the new GP principles to paediatricians and psychiatrists.

**AA** talked about key provisions in local government. Authorities who offer strong provisions and support are making good progress.

**LC** discussed the relationship between parents and schools and the importance of the AAA's back-to-school campaign to underline the importance of attendance. An emphasis on the wellbeing of a child was key to getting children back into school.

**LC** highlighted that child poverty is also an issue, with some children unable to afford the bus to school. LC stressed the importance of making schools aware of

reasonable adjustments and how those should be used. But ensuring that high expectations remain is important.

**WC** talked further about reasonable adjustments agreed as part of EHCP provision and Local Authorities role in ensuring that those are reviewed on a regular basis. He stressed the importance of schools having confidence on what reasonable adjustments can be offered, especially within special schools and Alternative Provisions settings.

**JC** commented that the pandemic changed the dynamic between children, schools and families.

**Action-** Children's Commissioner's Office to consider further what a strong school pastoral offer looks like and share any best practice examples with DfE.

### 3. Attendance at the start of a new term

**Owner:** Attendance Division official, Department for Education

Minister Coutinho asked Attendance Division official to talk about Department's plans on back-to-school communications.

Key plans include:

- Secretary of State leading the campaign through sector engagement
- Mobilising a wide array of workforces, practitioners, parent stakeholder organisations, and children's charities
- New tools, policies, and initiatives
- A targeted media campaign

**AS** mentioned, the development of clear messages for schools and the need to turn them into a practical toolkit that school can use.

**CR** suggested capitalising on successful policing interventions and linking them with other approaches.

**Action-** DfE to go back to CR with ideas on how the police force can get involved.

**AW** suggested involving multiple agencies to explore the effectiveness of programmes like breakfast clubs and the National Tutoring Programme.

**JC** stressed the importance of starting the work now, highlighting the criticality of the first day of school and the first three days of term being predictors of absence.

**Action-** Children's Commissioner's office to follow up with AAA members on the August regional roundtables.

**Action-** DfE to develop resources that can help schools to communicate with parents.

**WC** mentioned the need for Supporting Families programmes to continue focusing

on attendance and for this initiative to be integrated into the attendance agenda at Government level.

**AF** emphasised the importance of clear and reassuring messages and suggested testing these messages with young people themselves.

**TE** discussed the significance of transitions, including for children who struggle with change and needs additional support to settle into a new setting.

**AS** mentioned, upcoming improvements to the Ofsted School Attendance handbook that will help to ensure that attendance remains high priority.

**SB** thanked everyone for their support, emphasising the importance of getting the message right to ensure it takes into consideration the different circumstances.

## **5. Closing remarks**

**Owner:** The Rt Hon Claire Coutinho, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

The Minister concluded the meeting thanking attendees for the discussion and their involvement this year.

The Alliance secretariat will follow up with the dates for the next meeting.

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