



Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 6th June 2023, 14:00-15:00, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP Secretary of State for Education

Attendees

- Sarah Clarke- Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[SC]**
- Matthew Cook - Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads **[MC]**
- Leora Cruddas- Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts (CST) **[LC]**
- Dame Rachel de Souza- Children's Commissioner **[RDS]**
- Susan Douglas CBE – CEO, Eden Academy Trust **[SD]**
- Tina Emery – Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[TE]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy- National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada-President, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) **[DCG]**
- Dame Christine Lenehan- deputising for Anna Feuchtwang **[CL]**
- John Pearce – President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) **[JP]**
- Mrunal Sisodia- Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[MS]**
- Amanda Spielman – HM Chief Inspector, OFSTED **[AS]**
- Paul Stride- Portfolio Coordinator, Metropolitan Police deputising for Commander Catherine Roper **[PS]**
- Isabelle Trowler- Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**

Apologies

- Ade Adetosoye OBE – Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- 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)
- Commander Catherine Roper- Wiltshire's Chief Constable Forums & National Police Chiefs' Council Children and Young People portfolio Manager.
- Anna Feuchtwang – Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau
- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor

Officials in attendance

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

- Isabel Sherlock–Children’s Commissioner’s Office **[JC]**
- Simon Blake – Deputy Director, Attendance Division **[SB]**
- Private Secretary to Secretary of State
- Elizabeth Franey- The Specialist Provision, Assessment and Family Experience Division Lead **[EF]**
- Officials from Attendance Division **[AD]** and Children in Need Outcomes Unit **[CINO]**

1. Welcome from the Secretary of State

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

The Secretary of State thanked the members for all their work and stressed the importance of getting children back into school in September and her focus on the issue, including her keen interest in mobilising the sector now to drive a strong ‘back to school’ moment in September. The Secretary of State also welcomed Sarah Clarke **[SC]** who will be replacing Mrunal Sisodia as co-chair of National Network of Parent Carer.

2. Children in Need item

Owner: Children in Need Outcomes Unit official **[CINO]** and Matthew Cook, Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads **[MC]**

Secretary of State handed over to **CINO** who talked about the Children in Need agenda item.

Key points included:

- The Children in Need (2019) review found that 1.6 million children needed a social worker in the 6- year period looked at. The adversity, trauma and pre-care experiences of children have a lasting impact, meaning poor education and health outcomes persist throughout childhood and into adulthood.
- The extension of the Virtual School Head role to all children with a social worker was a key commitment from the review – building on their successes with the looked-after population. It was implemented (on a non-statutory basis) from September 2021.
- Children on child protection plans have some of the highest level of persistent absence of all children, and we need collectively to ensure this is understood across the system so they continue to be prioritised.

CINO handed over to **MC** to introduce the work of the Virtual School Heads (VSH), the core intervention specifically focused on Children in Need.

Key points included:

- VSH and Virtual School Teams (**VST**) regardless of structure are well connected to leaders in both Social Care, Corporate Parenting and Education. They collect attendance of all Children in Care daily, monitor exclusions and thus avoid 8 children

a year being permanently excluded. Virtual School Monitoring acts as an effective bridge between education and social care.

- So far the extension of VSH duty helped with:
 - o Developing network, sharing practice, engagement in Action Research conducted by Oxford University Rees Centre
 - o Increasing focus on internal monitoring with a dedicated resource across the trust bringing increased challenge and support raising attendance for Children with Social Worker
 - o Introducing improvements to CIN/CIP planning with greater focus on attendance
 - o Social care managers becoming more attuned to live school attendance information for their cohorts with closer links between services.
- The next steps include joint working appropriately celebrated and rewarded, broader metrics to acknowledge success, strengthening strategic partnerships between social care and education sector leaders, effective local or national technical solutions to better share information on which children are on a plan.

RDS noted that the focus should be placed in improving national level data on Children in Need. RDS highlighted the importance of working on this issue and figuring out ways to improve the quality of the data collection. The Children's Commissioner also urged caution when using national tracking for Local Authority level targeting.

CL identified key things that would help children with SEND: data, admission and tracking.

CL noted that there are significant issues with behaviour in schools. CL stated that it is important for schools to offer reasonable adjustments to children when necessary but there is some worry on what is acceptable. CL observed that more clarity on how to find balance between offering reasonable adjustment and enforcement is needed. CL believes that the promotion of reasonable adjustments where that has positive impact on attendance is needed.

IT highlighted the importance of Social Worker's role in improving school attendance. IT has noted that there is some debate on where Social Workers fit on the issue of attendance. IT believes that for social workers absence should be about what deeper issues it could indicate as the safest place for a child is at school.

AS highlighted the importance of recognising the overlap of children in different categories. AS also talked about the different needs within SEND as no one solution fits all – SEMH as a primary needs looks different to 'born with' SEND categories.

SL talked about her personal experience of school responsiveness to SEND need and the need for an adaptive system.

TE talked about the importance of school being a safe place. TE commented that for some children school might be a challenging place due to unmet SEND need and there should be some difficult conversations around this. TE believes it is important for all sectors to be linking in together as this is the only way we can fix the attendance issue.

AS provided feedback on the framing of wellbeing in the slides.

Action- officials to relay those observations to the relevant policy team.

JP noted that these issues are very complex, but it is important to view schools as a protective factor. The group should work on tackling the lack of educational engagement of Children in Need.

CG is taking a paper through the UK council outlining the role of GPs in tackling the attendance issue. CG highlighted the importance of viewing school as a safe place as usually absence is a symptom of deeper issues. Multi-disciplinary approach was said to be the key to improving attendance.

SoS highlighted the importance of understanding that some children might have very specific needs, but school should always be viewed as a positive space where they can learn.

RDS talked about the importance of looking at a multi-disciplinary approach to local areas to figure out specific answers to local problem.

Action-policy team to consider how to play in Commissioners into local Attendance Action Alliance work or other multiagency arrangements.

SB highlighted the existence of attendance guidance and reasonable adjustments options that schools should be using.

SoS noted that some children are still struggling with transitioning back to in person learning, some of those children were already struggling before the pandemic but now need additional support to reintegrate back into school.

CL commented that many children are lacking the confidence and need additional support before successfully returning back to school full time.

MC noted that first step should always be using reasonable adjustments to make the child feel more comfortable as well as contacting the parents to find out what support they might need.

Action- Attendees to share Children in Need data with networks to highlight absence issue amongst this cohort.

Action- Matthew Cooke's recommendations to be fed back to relevant policy teams at Department for Education

Action- Daily data team to discuss the Children in Need date with Children's Social Care colleagues with a view to improving data collection quality.

3.Special Educational Needs

Owner: Attendance Division Official [AD]

Secretary of State noted that the Children in Need discussion has already significantly got into the issue of children with Special Educational Needs. She handed over to Attendance Division official to show attendees SEND attendance data and the different patterns between different SEND primary needs.

Key finding included:

-Absence for children with SEND is higher than for their peers; the gap is better than last year but worse relative to pre-Covid-19.

- Longstanding barriers include school processes not aligning with needs (e.g. noisy environments), access to education (physical and curriculum), and specialist workforce capacity.

SD noted that getting a child into school should always be a number one priority. SD urged the importance of messaging around the importance of attendance to everyone and not just the parents. She asked to return to the issue, including the role of special schools.

RDS commented that wellbeing of a child should always be at the centre.

SD, CL and MS asked that back to school comms should be attentive to the need to include SEND children, parental trust, and the additional barriers they face

Action- to bring SEND attendance back to a future meeting for a fuller discussion.

4.Closing remarks

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

The Secretary of State thanked the members for attending the meeting, their continued support for the Alliance and emphasised the importance of making attendance everyone's business.

Action- DfE officials to produce a detailed plan for July meeting to drive September back to school moment.

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