



Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 3rd May 2023, 15:00-16:00, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools.

Attendees

- James Bowen- Director National Association of Head teachers (NAHT), deputising for Paul Whiteman **[JB]**
- Susan Douglas CBE – CEO, Eden Academy Trust **[SD]**
- Tina Emery - Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer **[MS]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy- National Clinical Advisor on Children’s Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Anna Feuchtwang – Chief Executive of the National Children’s Bureau **[AF]**
- Richard Gill- deputising for Isabelle Trowler **[RG]**
- Julie McCulloch- Director of Policy, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) deputising for Geoff Barton **[JMC]**
- John Pearce – President, Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) **[JP]**
- Amanda Spielman – HM Chief Inspector, OFSTED **[AS]**
- Paul Stride- Portfolio Coordinator, Metropolitan Police deputising for Commander Catherine Roper **[PS]**
- Rob Tarn CBE- CEO, Northern Education Trust (NET) **[RT]**
- Russell Viner - Department for Education, Chief Scientific Advisor **[RV]**

Apologies

- Ade Adetosoye OBE – Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- Geoff Barton- General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Leora Cruddas- Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts (CST)
- Isabelle Trowler- Chief Social Worker for Children and Families represented by Richard Gill **[RG]**
- Paul Whiteman- General Secretary, National Association of Head teachers (NAHT)
- Dame Rachel de Souza- Children’s Commissioner **[RDS]**
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada-President, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) **[CG]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE- - Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) **[PW]**

Officials in attendance

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

- Juliette Cammaerts – Director Policy, Planning & Delivery, Children’s Commissioner’s Office **[JC]**
- Sophie Taylor – Director, Vulnerable Children Strategy & Educational Engagement **[ST]**
- Simon Blake – Deputy Director, Attendance Division **[SB]**
- Attendance Division **[AD]** officials
- Heather Benjamin- Chief Social Worker for Children and Families Office
- Andrew Baxter

1. Welcome from Minister Gibb

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

The Minister thanked Alliance members for attending and welcomed a newly appointed member, Russell Viner, who will work with the Alliance to further the understanding of the relationship between mental health and absence.

The Minister also welcomed John Pearce the new ADCS president.

The Minister announced that Susan Douglas will be leaving the Alliance to dedicate her time to the SENDAP implementation board, where her experience will be invaluable. SD noted that she will continue to champion attendance in that role. The Alliance secretariat are working with Susan to identify a replacement with similar levels of SEND expertise.

The Minister also gave an update on the work done by the Alliance since the last meeting and highlighted the importance of this work.

2. Parental Communications

Owner: Attendance Division official **[AD]**, Department for Education

- The Minister reminded members of the discussion at the last meeting on parental attitudes about attendance and handed over to Attendance Division official **[AD]** to talk about the findings from DfE’s parental communications research. The Department commissioned analysis of messaging to parents on attendance in order to gain insight into parental attitudes toward school attendance post-pandemic, and to understand how to effectively communicate with parents about this topic.

Key findings included:

- None of the parents who participated in the research viewed themselves as a parent who lets their child miss school for unacceptable or frivolous reasons.
- The parents did however acknowledge that the values and information they use to make judgments about attendance have changed since the pandemic.
- The findings suggest when talking to parents about attendance it is best to:

- Lead with individualised data about absences.
- Frame absences in terms of numbers of lessons, rather than days or weeks missed.
- Emphasise the holistic benefits of school.
- Refer to formal guidelines on illness e.g. NHS guidelines on mild illness.
- Adopt a factual rather than punitive tone.
- Be careful to generalise about children's feelings and experiences.

AS commented that this is a very important piece of research that will be useful to many schools.

Action- OFSTED to feed the findings into inspector training for conversations with staff about attendance while ensuring that those framings are used in school conversations.

SD felt there was a perception that keeping children off school to avoid spreading illness was the right thing to do, especially in the Special School context. SD talked about the success of communicating through text messaging with parents to encourage attendance. She also highlighted the importance of reiterating health messages and giving parents guidance on when children should stay at home and when it is safe to go to school.

JB asked about the applicability of "lessons missed" framing for parents of young children in primary schools, where there may be less relevance owing to the type of learning being done.

AF stressed the importance of the messages showing empathy towards parents as most parents want to do the right thing. Anna also highlighted the need for talking about wellbeing of a child as a whole.

JMC raised the issue of children who are coming into school, but not making it into all of their lessons. She believes the issue might be more complex than just when the pupil is not in school altogether.

RT highlighted that percentages are not particularly helpful in attendance as most parents would be happy with 90%. RT has observed some success when using the metric of sessions of lost learning. RT also reinforced that children who were severely absent prior to the pandemic are even more likely to be absent than before.

JC talked about the importance of every minute missed from school. She also believed it to be useful to talk about attendance in the context of things around the core school day (e.g. mentioning the football club on Thursday). JC also highlighted the need for conversation around parents with additional needs. If all messaging is in writing, this can present challenges and can be a barrier for some parents.

RV stressed the importance of wellbeing of a child as whole. Russell highlighted that being in school has been shown to improve overall wellbeing and mental health. RV also talked about the need for clear advice about illness and when parents should keep children at home.

TE brought to Alliance's attention that there already is a clear guidance on when children should stay at home : <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health->

[protection-in-schools-and-other-childcare-facilities/children-and-young-people-settings-tools-and-resources.](#)

AD rounded off the item by thanking members for their contributions and made a commitment to ensure the research is put into a format that is easily shared and accessible to schools, taking on board members' reflections.

3.Looked After Children Report by Children's Commissioner

Owner: Juliette Cammaerts – Director Policy, Planning & Delivery, Children's Commissioner's **[JC]**

Juliette Cammaerts was asked to present the Looked After Children (LAC) Report on behalf of the Children's Commissioner. JC presented some interim findings from their LAC report, the full report will be published shortly

AS raised the importance of remembering that children in homes tend to have more special needs than general population. More than 90% in children's home have Special Educational Needs which could be impacting their attendance overall and therefore their attendance should be read in that context.

JP highlighted that LAC can't be compared to the general population. Many children who come into care have not had previous experience in education. LAC attendance outcomes are not as bad as other children in need, such as those with child protection plans.

Action- to bring an item to the Attendance Action Alliance in June meeting on Children in Need and their attendance.

4.Closing remarks

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

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

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