



Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 19th January 2023, 10:00-11:00, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools

Attendees

- Steve Crocker OBE (President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)) **[SC]**
- 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 Forums & East of England Regional Steering Group Member) **[TE]**
- Anna Feuchtwang – Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau **[AF]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy (National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England) **[PF]**
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada (President, Royal College of General Practitioners) **[CG]**
- Amanda Spielman (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector) **[AS]**
- Rob Tarn (CEO, Northern Education Trust) **[RT]**
- Isabelle Trowler (Chief Social Worker for Children and Families) **[IT]**
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE (Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) **[PWa]**

Apologies

- Ade Adetosoye CBE (Children and Families Spokesperson, SOLACE) **[AA]**
- Geoff Barton (General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Represented by Julie McCulloch, Director of Policy for the ASCL) **[JM]**
- Commander Catherine Roper (Head of Profession, Crime Prevention, Inclusion and Engagement, Metropolitan Police) represented by Superintendent Simon Rotherham **[SSR]** and Paul Stride (Portfolio Coordinator, Metropolitan Police) **[PS]**
- Mrunal Sisodia – Co-Chair National Network of Parent Carer Forums **[MS]**

- Paul Whiteman (General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers) **[PWh]** represented by Nick Brook (Deputy General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers **[NB]**)

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]**
- Heather Benjamin - Private Secretary to the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families
- Sophie Taylor - Director, Vulnerable Children's Strategy and Educational Engagement
- Simon Blake - Deputy Director, Attendance Division
- Tanya McCormack - Deputy Director, Families Analysis Division **[TM]**
- Attendance Division officials
- Private Secretary to Minister Gibb

1. Welcome from the Minister

Owner: Minister Nick Gibb

The Minister introduced himself. The Alliance's progress last year was commended with the Minister highlighting the joint responsibility for overcoming challenges to attendance.

2. Introductions

Owner: All

The Minister asked members to introduce themselves and to highlight achievement for the Alliance in the last academic year.

RDS reinforced the value of improving attendance and the need for a deep understanding of the data. RDS talked about her survey with Local Authorities (LAs), which were contacted to find out how many children were missing education. She felt that a unique identifier for children would support multi-agency approaches to identifying children missing education. Rachel also highlighted that many LAs felt special educational needs were not being met.

RT recapped the achievements of the North Shore pilot, which has helped to spread attendance best practice across schools. Rob talked about its success, and the planned expansion of attendance hubs this academic year. The Secretary of State recently invited a selection of trusts to establish their own attendance hubs: several trusts have already expressed an interest.

Action - Meeting will be held in February with DfE policy teams and interested trusts to discuss next steps in establishing new attendance hubs.

CG emphasised her commitment to being a member of the Alliance. She highlighted the essential importance of cross- sector working to tackle school attendance, and vital role the NHS and care services had to play. Those children not engaging in education are also at risk of not engaging with medical or care services.

PF highlighted the positive mental health benefits of being in school. He stressed school attendance can often be beneficial for children experiencing normal but difficult emotions, and that it was important to discourage over-medicalisation and absence in such circumstances.

AS highlighted that education is a long term game and that relationships with parents and children are at the centre of attendance issues. AS also raised that capacity at LA levels is an issue as some are struggling to cope with attendance referrals.

TE voiced her concerns about mental health services being at capacity and the importance of children being in adequate educational provision. TE also highlighted SEND exclusions as an issue.

SC highlighted the need for promoting the importance of school's attendance to parents - children must be in school to ensure their future. He also felt using fines can sometimes be appropriate, but with a focus on early help (e.g. using Early Help funding).

PWa stressed the importance of Children's Commissioner's children missing education work, given the safeguarding risks to children. He also felt exclusions sometimes made issues more difficult and that it would be helpful to better understand the pathways to exclusions,

AF talked about her joint pledge for 22/23 with TE, focussed on sharing best practice around inclusive practice for children with SEMH, whole school wellbeing and attendance. She expressed concern about bullying.

3. Current trends in attendance and key challenges

Owner: Tanya McCormack – Deputy Director, Families Analysis Division

TM presented data trends comparing daily data (from 76% of schools) for Autumn 22/23 compared to Autumn 21/22 to Alliance members. TM highlighted the benefits of real time data on attendance. Key insights included:

- Absence in the Autumn term was lower (at 8%) compared with non-attendance last year but remains significantly higher than pre-covid (4.3% in AY 18/19). The wider long-term trend was a decrease in absence levels over time until the pandemic hit.
- Absence was much higher in the last couple of weeks of autumn term, largely driven by the rise in authorised illness absence, across all school types.
- Absence appears to be lower at the very start of a term/half term, rising to its highest point in the last week before a term end/half term. Attendance is also better midweek than on Fridays/Mondays.
- As well as illness increases, there was an increase in unauthorised absence in the last week of term. This also drove an increase in those recorded as persistently absent. This unauthorised absence increase is largely driven by secondary schools.
- On vulnerable children, we have seen increased absence overall – from an already higher baseline - but there is no evidence to suggest a consistently disproportionate increase in absence for these pupils.

- The North East and Yorkshire and the Humber show the highest rates of unauthorised absence across the regions.
- New data for January is showing illness absence data drop back down for the start of this term, but we are monitoring unauthorised absence.

Members discussed their reflections on the data, as well as some of the 22/23 pledges they have been developing.

CG highlighted the importance of promoting understanding that being at school is normally better for children. CG would like to see more GPs working with parents and teachers to help them understand why asking for a fit note is not always the right approach.

NB was impressed with the Children's Commissioner's work and was keen to support it in future. He also thought Rob Tarn's work was very impressive and there might be ways he could support that.

Action - Children's Commissioner and Peter Wanless to discuss if/how their pledges could link up.

IT emphasised the importance of the work done by the Alliance Members and cited an improving relationship between social workers and schools.

LC said she was keen to work with CG on some of the health issues raised in the meeting.

Action- LC and CG to discuss joint work on GP approaches to school absence, including on how we ensure clear messaging to the sector on this work.

SD highlighted the importance of increasing representation for the specialist sector. She was pleased to see that Rob Tarn's pledge for 22/23 included a focus on specialist settings, she also thought it was important to work with the health sector to minimise the impact of multiple medical appointments.

Action- Secretariat to work with Alliance members to identify and agree deliverables under each pledge of action.

4. Closing remarks from the Minister

Owner: Minister Nick Gibb

The Minister again thanked members for their commitment to improving attendance, and for the new pledges of action they have made for 22/23. He highlighted the importance of the work already done but underlined that challenges still remained, and therefore their support and action remained crucial. The Minister asked the group to reconvene in around six weeks, to focus on Children Missing Education.

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