



## Attendance Action Alliance

Notes of meeting held on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 11:30-12:30, Secretary of State's Office, Department for Education and virtually via MS Teams

### Chair

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Education

### Attendees

- Ade Adetosoye OBE (Children and Families Spokesperson, SOLACE)
- Geoff Barton (General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL))
- Dame Rachel de Souza (Children's Commissioner)
- Tina Emery (Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums & South West Regional Steering Group Member)
- Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau (NCB)
- Professor Peter Fonagy (National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health, NHS England)
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada (President, Royal College of General Practitioners)
- Charlotte Ramsden OBE (President, Association of Directors of Children's Services)
- Commander Catherine Roper (Head of Profession, Crime Prevention, Inclusion and Engagement, Metropolitan Police)
- Amanda Spielman (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector)
- Rob Tarn (CEO, Northern Education Trust)
- Paul Whiteman (General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers)

### Apologies

- Leora Cruddas (Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts (CST)) *represented by* Steve Rollett, Deputy Chief Executive of the CST
- Susan Douglas CBE (CEO, Eden Academy Trust)
- Mrunal Sisodia (Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums & East of England Regional Steering Group Member)
- Isabelle Trowler (Chief Social Worker for Children and Families *represented by* Lauren McCrum, Private Secretary to the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families)
- Sir Peter Wanless CBE (Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)

## Officials in attendance

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

- Indra Morris – Director General Children’s Services, Comms and Strategy Group
- Sophie Taylor - Director Schools COVID Response and Senior Responsible Officer Attendance
- Andrew McCully – Director General for Early Years and Schools Group
- Jocelyn Shaw – Deputy Director Schools COVID Response
- David Thomas – Secretary of State’s Policy Adviser
- Kate Dixon – Director of School Curriculum, Pastoral Care and Safeguarding
- Matthew Hopkinson – Deputy Director, Life Skills Division
- Officials from School Attendance Policy and Strategy and School Attendance Programme Monitoring
- Private Secretary to the Secretary of State

## 1. Welcome

**Owner:** Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Education (Chair)

The Secretary of State thanked Alliance members for attending and for their ongoing work to support the Department.

He referenced the Schools White Paper and the SEND Green Paper which the Department published on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March, demonstrating the Department’s commitment to developing a long-term strategy on attendance.

## 2. Progress Updates from Alliance members

**Owner:** Jocelyn Shaw

Details of the new Attendance Division within the Department for Education were briefly mentioned. This will drive forwards progress on improving attendance.

All pledges are progressing well. Some pledge owners gave updates:

- As part of the investigation into children missing from education, Dame Rachel de Souza has now spoken with over 400 children and system leaders on ways to boost attendance. Schools and Local Authorities (LAs) are very keen to engage with this work. She plans on publishing an attendance report in June.
- Rob Tarn raised the North Shore Academy attendance best practice pilot, with many schools being signed up to this. He is meeting schools to evaluate the effectiveness of new attendance protocols introduced through the pilot.
- Commander Catherine Roper is finalising the detail of an Alliance pledge she will be making, focusing on reducing serious violence and the link to attendance. She is

speaking to national and regional police force leads to ensure that the detail of this pledge can be delivered across all police forces.

- Dame Clare Gerada highlighted that she is engaging GPs on the link between attendance and children's health, including getting attendance onto the agenda of the June NHS Assembly meeting. She reiterated her commitment to treat low attendance as a public health issue.

Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive of the National Children's Bureau (NCB), was also welcomed to the Alliance, representing SEND children and their families in order to make attendance policies more inclusive.

### **3. Pupil mental wellbeing and attendance - Providing non-clinical support**

**Owner:** Kate Dixon and Professor Peter Fonagy

Kate Dixon, Director of School Curriculum, Pastoral Care and Safeguarding within the Department of Education, framed this discussion on non-clinical support firstly around pupil wellbeing.

The Department has worked hard to improve the mental wellbeing of pupils pre- and post-pandemic. School closures had a negative effect on pupils' wellbeing, with the Children's Commissioner's report supporting this. Stakeholders also highlighted that anxiety over school safety and multiple examinations throughout the year were prime wellbeing concerns.

Professor Peter Fonagy displayed data comparing the predicted vs actual numbers of children referred for mental health support within England. This showed an increase in the number of children being seen, but a decrease in waiting times for children to receive their first contact.

Mental Health Support Teams have been able to see children at an increased rate, with 183 teams working with around 3,000 schools, equating to 16 schools per team. A further 134 mental health support teams plan to be rolled out this year, with a further 112 in training throughout 2022. By 2023, there should be nearly 400 mental health support teams nationally, covering a third of children in England.

The importance of prevention was raised in relation to poor wellbeing. Peter Fonagy talked through three types of prevention:

- Universal prevention, such as promoting good mental health and wellbeing in all children, helps to create the conditions in which children can succeed.
- Secondary prevention methods, which are more targeted towards children already showing signs of poor wellbeing.
- Tertiary interventions, which are for cases which are harder to treat, and which aim to reduce the ongoing impact of mental health issues

Mental Health Support Teams and Mental Health Practitioners are being trained in interventions which are evidence-based and which aim to tackle the cause of mental health issues. Steps have been taken in training to ensure that whole family interventions are considered. The Department is also mapping the different ways in which schools support pupil wellbeing. Some schools have more targeted discussions on mental health and target their support towards particularly vulnerable groups. Schools also noted the need for more monetary resource to be put into NHS Services around wellbeing and mental health.

The leadership within a school is very important in fostering a whole school approach to wellbeing. The curriculum should support this whole-school approach, with Relationship, Health and Sex Education (RHSE) curriculum playing an important role and helping to put issues into perspective.

**Action:** The Department will consider how we can support the delivery of high quality RHSE in a proportionate way.

Kate Dixon thanked Geoff Barton for his comments on the Schools White Paper regarding extra-curricular activities, and recognised the important role that sport, music and art play in providing pupils with a well-rounded offer at school. These extra-curricular activities were valued highly during the pandemic. Dame Rachel de Souza reiterated that primary age children are particularly engaged with extracurricular offers at school, breakfast clubs and after school enrichment and that these contribute to their wellbeing.

Kate Dixon highlighted that early support is incredibly important, with the widely rolled out senior mental health lead training being very popular within schools. Specific training was also offered to school staff throughout the pandemic to support pupils with the return to school.

Secondary and tertiary prevention methods were raised, with targeted prevention helping pupils to feel included and that school cultures enable this. Mental Health Support Teams play an important role in prevention and help to promote a whole-school approach to wellbeing through assemblies, workshops and individual counselling. As MHSTs settle in and embed in a school, the relationship can become more strategic and enable resources to be used most effectively. Tina Emery raised that staff retention is also essential to mental health support teams working effectively.

The Department's Children and Young People programme approach to school attendance and mental health is still relevant despite a new focus on different drivers of absence. Most notably, the online harms work has been introduced, which focuses on the harms which are associated with social media and how children can be educated about these.

Kate Dixon welcomed thoughts on this work and what else the Department can do in this space.

Amanda Spielman agreed with Professor Peter Fonagy regarding approaching wellbeing from a prevention standpoint. Clearer messaging is needed for schools around what is within their remit to boost wellbeing and how they can be effective. Wellbeing needs to be integrated into the culture of schools, rather than being 'taught'. Amanda and Peter Fonagy

discussed how we can help teenagers to not self-diagnose mental health issues and understand the balance between general wellbeing and medically diagnosed mental health issues. Dame Rachel de Souza discussed Sir Isaac Newton free school in Norwich where pupils' wellbeing resilience is encouraged and how this improves attendance.

**Action** – the Department is to work with Professor Peter Fonagy on developing communications to highlight effective approaches to promoting good wellbeing for pupils

Tina Emery raised that CAMHS referral is often misused in cases of wellbeing issues which is not always the best route of care and schools need to be aware of local services which are available pre-CAMHS. She highlighted the importance correct pathways for children through the mental health system, especially for children with late diagnosis of autism. Online self-referral tools can be useful here. The role of bullying on a child's mental health should also not be forgotten.

The important role of voluntary sector organisations was raised, and Secretary of State emphasised the important charity partnerships which Aspire Academy in Blackpool have fostered to support pupils and their families in complex cases of absence.

**Action** - The Department is to look into how charity partnerships with schools to support families with complex cases of absence can be scaled up

Rachel de Souza raised September as a key point for the Department to consider attendance interventions relating to wellbeing and preventing absence, including communications around celebrating the first day of school, summer schools and family-school relationships. The Secretary of State raised an example of Hammersmith Academy where the positive relationship between the school and families due to the quality of outcomes promotes good attendance

Charlotte Ramsden raised that a lot of early help systems for children are developing actively and that youth work is an important part of this, with Paul Whiteman agreeing. Trauma-informed mental health practices were discussed, as well as Greater Manchester's multi-agency approach towards attendance. Given the early success of mental health support teams, Charlotte Ramsden challenged the Department on their targets for the reach of these MHST's.

**Action** – the Department is to investigate the possible trajectories for the expansion of the Mental Health Support Team work beyond current NHSE goals, looking at how they can reach as many schools as possible.

Anna Feuchtwang highlighted examples of school cultures fostering behaviour, wellbeing and academic success. She would like the Department to consider how we can incentivise schools to focus on wellbeing, raising possibilities around pupil premium funding allocations and inspections. NCB findings have highlighted that the needs of children with developmental issues need to be met in order to support their attendance.

Rob Tarn echoed points made on school leadership and wellbeing strategies, with good leadership meaning that wraparound care can be focused on those who need it most. He

wants to see a reduction in the over-medicalisation of wellbeing within schools. This leads to truly vulnerable children not receiving the help they need due to long waiting lists.

Paul Whiteman raised a point regarding the resources around arts, music and sporting activities, as these are core to children's wellbeing and the Department needs to not denote these as 'optional' through the language used to discuss them.

Geoff Barton highlighted the importance to supporting attendance of focusing on and talking about schools as a place where children feel safe, happy and develop as people.

**Action:** The Department is to look into a best practice examples of good school leadership leading to positive cultures around wellbeing – highlighting the value of sport, art and developmental activities in both curriculum and extra-curricular activity.

**Action:** The Department is to investigate clarifying the roles and responsibilities of teachers and school leaders and schools in providing support for Social, Emotional and Mental Health issues, avoiding unnecessary medicalisation and drawing on non-clinical support.

## 4. Multi-Agency working and best practice

**Owner:** Ade Adetosoye, SOLACE

SOLACE's report was circulated to Alliance members. The detail of SOLACE and ADCS' pledge was discussed.

The various research areas and findings of SOLACE's best practice paper were discussed. Charlotte Ramsden raised that Directors for Children's services are also supportive of these findings. Key points included:

- Investigations into how the pandemic has affected or changed the groups of pupils about whom Chief Executives are most concerned about regarding persistent absence. Children in care need to be supported in a multi-agency way. Key absence factors included low self-belief and low engagement.
  - **Action** – The Department is to investigate how we can support children not known to social care in boosting their attendance
  - Looking at approaches from both local and national government which have been most effective for persistent absence. The value of early help systems in Dorset were raised, multi-agency work within Manchester was highlighted. SOLACE have identified LAs who are carrying out best practice regarding reducing persistent absence and mental health support and will be sharing these with Chief Executives. These best practice examples have been used by the Department in developing new attendance guidance, with case studies to also be developed from this best practice
- Action** – SOLACE to share Local Authority best practice examples with their Chief Executives

- Further work the Government could do to tackle persistent absence was discussed. The Schools White Paper and the SEND Green Paper were commended. More funding is still desired, with some LAs moving away from early interventions due to funding pressures. He would like to see existing guidance on attendance strengthened.
- Support for vulnerable pupils was discussed, with school and wider community commitments of support being needed.

The key asks within SOLACE's report were covered, with key themes around the outcomes of the Schools White Paper in redefining the role of local government in school attendance. Support for a statutory duty for schools to share attendance data was discussed, with Rachel de Souza supporting this and raising the possibility of Unique Identifiers for children. Rachel also raised good data sharing practice between MATs and LAs and the excellent data sharing agreements which have been created and that the Department should continue to support this.

Baroness Barran will be joining SOLACE's policy board in April to speak to Chief Executives and discuss the findings of the Schools White Paper. Ade will be speaking to Chief Executives to identify what value SOLACE can add in the Local Government space.

Geoff Barton raised that there need to be realistic expectations of what schools can do in this space. He was extremely proud to hear schools talked about as a place where children feel safe and recognised how this can contribute to children's wellbeing.

Secretary of State echoed his support of a whole school system approach to wellbeing and attendance

## **5. Closing remarks**

Secretary of State thanked members for their attendance and noted that very useful discussion had taken place. He would like to see the Alliance continue to work at pace and identify the quick wins in this space, such as shaping the narrative around why data sharing is so beneficial for schools and how this will make a difference.

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