

Notes of meeting held on 21st February 2024, 14:00-15:00, Sanctuary Buildings, London and virtually via MS Teams.

Chair

David Johnston OBE MP, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

Attendees

- Isabelle Trowler – Chief Social Worker for Children and Families **[IT]**
- Matthew Cooke – Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads and Virtual School Head for Suffolk **[MC]**
- John Pearce – President, Association of Directors of Children’s Services **[JP]**
- Ade Adetosoye OBE – Children and Families Spokesperson, Solace **[AA]**
- Professor Peter Fonagy – National Clinical Advisor on Children’s Mental Health, NHS England **[PF]**
- Lee Owston – His Majesty’s Inspector, National Director of Education, Ofsted, deputising for Sir Martyn Oliver **[LO]**
- Dame Rachel de Souza – Children’s Commissioner **[RdS]**
- Leora Cruddas – Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts **[LC]**
- Tina Emery – Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and South West Regional Steering Group Member **[TE]**
- Sarah Clarke – Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums and East of England Regional Steering Group Member **[SC]**
- Anna Feuchtwang – Chief Executive, National Children’s Bureau **[AF]**
- Peter Wanless – Chief Executive, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children **[PWa]**
- Michael Robinson – Senior Executive Principal, Northern Education Trust, deputising Rob Tarn **[MR]**
- Russell Viner – Chief Scientific Advisor, Department for Education **[RV]**
- Warren Carratt – Chief Executive Officer, Nexus Multi Academy Trust and The Evolve Trust **[WC]**

Apologies

- Chief Constable Catherine Roper – National Police Chiefs’ Council Lead Children and Young Person’s Portfolio, Wiltshire Police **[CR]**
- Dr Rowena Christmas – Chair, Royal College of General Practitioners Cymru Wales **[RC]**
- Sir Martyn Oliver – HM Chief Inspector, Ofsted **[MO]**

- Geoff Barton – General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders [GB]
- Rob Tarn – Chief Executive Officer, Northern Education Trust [RT]
- Paul Whiteman – General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers [PWh]

Officials in Attendance

- Fran Oram – Director, Children’s Social Care [FO]
- Simon Blake – Deputy Director, Attendance Division [SB]
- Juliette Cammaerts [JC] and Alice Wilcock [AW] – Office of the Children’s Commissioner
- Officials from Attendance Division
- Officials from Children in Need Outcomes

1. Welcome from Minister Johnston

Minister Johnston welcomed members to the meeting and shared his excitement for attending his first Alliance meeting.

Minister Johnston offered reflections from a recent school visit, highlighting that the optimal support for children is when they are in school and that safeguarding risks can sometimes emerge when they are absent from school.

2. Update on pledge updates & action from the last meeting

Owner: Attendance Division official [AD]

AD expressed gratitude towards members for their continued work to deliver their pledges and their support of the national communications campaign.

SB highlighted significant upcoming attendance policy announcements and noted the importance of these milestones for progressing the Department’s aim to improve school attendance.

3. Children’s Social Care reforms

Owners: Isabelle Trowler [IT]

IT discussed the clear correlation between safety, stability, family functioning, and attendance levels. She highlighted that taken together the Children’s Social Care (CSC) *National Framework* and updates to *Working together to safeguard children*, published in December 2023, clarify expectations for local authorities, alongside safeguarding partners in supporting and promoting attendance.

IT shared insights from her visits to Wigan and the West London Zone and highlighted the importance of data-driven approaches in social work and interventions to improve

attendance. She acknowledged the winners of the Social Worker in Education Award, thanking them for their efforts in improving school attendance.

4. Children in Need attendance improvement plan

Owner: Matthew Cooke [MC]

Minister Johnston thanked Isabelle Trowler, Matthew Cooke and John Pearce for the valuable work on the Children in Need (CiN) attendance improvement plan that they have developed as one of their pledges.

MC provided an update on the CiN attendance improvement plan and drew attention to the plan's short-term goal of capturing best practices through data-informed visits. He outlined the medium-term plans of webinars to disseminate best practice and longer-term plans to identify new emerging practice as the CSC reforms are embedded.

MC emphasised the importance of raising aspirations and achievement through training in virtual schools. He also shared the potential of CiN to succeed in the future with the right support.

JP highlighted the potential of data in learning best practices and agreed with MC on the importance of stability and belonging for better attendance outcomes particularly for those in alternative provision (AP).

AA suggested assessing the value added of a child receiving support from social care by tracking their attendance before and after a CiN plan or Child Protection Plan (CPP) is implemented.

Action: IT, MC and JP to explore how local authorities track attendance over time as part of their best practice gathering.

MC discussed the importance of a nuanced understanding of the concept of value added and suggested also considering metrics around exclusions and increases in full-time education.

LO discussed upcoming attendance training for inspectors to ensure school inspections have a strong focus on the progress on attendance, based on the right data, including for CiN, and the use of the theme of belonging to promote good attendance habits. Ofsted's area insights work will also allow a closer spotlight on how all the provision and services within a local area are working together in the best interests of children.

SC highlighted the need for the Ofsted inspection frameworks to support whole-family collaboration for the best interest of the child.

JP emphasised the importance of celebrating inclusivity and sharing best practices in the Ofsted framework.

MR agreed with the importance of considering and celebrating inclusivity, noting the impact of local context on the outcomes of children.

JC suggested immediate placement into AP for excluded CiN as a way to support the safeguarding and inclusivity of vulnerable children.

FO expressed that social workers cannot raise the attendance of CiN alone, so it was excellent to hear from a range of voices on this issue.

Action: Attendance officials to relay discussion to relevant teams internally and build into future AAA planning

5. Preparing for a strong start to September

Owner: Attendance Division official [AD]

Minister Johnston asked for reflections and suggestions on the back-to-school preparation top tips shared by attendance officials.

JC agreed with the focus on transition challenges from year to year and suggested adding a tip on transitioning into reception. She also emphasised the importance of building bonds in education and supporting social workers to achieve practical wins.

PF emphasised the power of communication between parents, children, and schools in facilitating attendance.

Action: Attendance officials to add a tip of the transition into reception and increase the prominence of the tips on school-parent relationships.

IT suggested re-circulating top tips for social workers.

Action: IT to re-issue top tips for social workers.

PWa suggested facilitating conversations between young people who are feeling anxious about school to help them understand they are not alone – and taking a similar approach with parents.

Action: PWa to explore facilitating these conversations through NSPCC.

6. Closing remarks

Minister Johnston thanked all members for their valuable contributions and concluded that officials will follow up to further discuss what individual members can do to support the delivery of the CiN plan and back to school preparation.

Action: Members and officials to discuss specific actions in the next round of pledge calls.

Minister Johnston closed the meeting. The next meeting is scheduled for 26th March.