



Department
for Education

Minutes of the Department for Education Science Advisory Council – October 2024

Committee: Department for Education Science Advisory Council

Meeting number: 001

Date: 31 October 2024

Location: In person meeting at the Department for Education, London

Attendees

SAC Members

Athene Donald (Chair)
Mark Mon-Williams (Deputy Chair)
Chris Bonell
William J. Browne
Claire Crawford
Michael Cribb
Dougal Hargreaves
Sonya Krutikova
Rose Luckin
Amy Orben
Paul Ramchandani
Michael J. Reiss

DfE Officials

Russell Viner – DfE Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (Natural Sciences) and Head of the Science Team
SAC Secretariat

DfE officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Head of National Standards Unit
Team Leader, National Standards Unit
Head of the SENDAP Analysis Unit

Minister Morgan

Stephen Morgan MP - Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Early Education)
Private Secretary to Minister Morgan

Actions arising

ACTION 1.1: Membership to comment and approve the Terms of Reference and Ways of Working.

ACTION 1.2: SAC Secretariat to table a review of the SAC governance structure in April 2025

ACTION 1.3: SAC Secretariat and SEND team to consider further opportunities for SAC to support the development of SEND policy, including the possibility of an online meeting in Autumn 2024.

ACTION 1.4: SAC secretariat to invite membership to input into Opportunity Mission R&D Priorities via correspondence and table a conversation at the next plenary meeting.

ACTION 1.5: SAC Secretariat and SAC Chair to review the structure and duration of plenary meetings.

Chair's welcome

The SAC Chair welcomed attendees to the inaugural meeting of the DfE SAC.

Introduction to DfE from the Chief Scientific Adviser

The CSA welcomed the creation of the SAC and their support in providing scientific advice to the Department. He introduced the structure of the Department for Education, its Ministers and the Senior Leadership Team.

The CSA gave insight into the science and wider analytical function within DfE: it covers all evidence used within the department, including natural sciences, engineering, social sciences and economics. The CSA's responsibilities include advising, overseeing science and evidence systems, and bringing external insights into the department.

Areas of work for the CSA include but are not limited to: monitoring of health issues within the education system, preparedness for potential outbreaks, mental health and technology, artificial intelligence, longitudinal studies, the use of datasets, and the built educational estate.

SAC Governance

The SAC secretariat gave an overview of the governance structure and ways of working of the SAC, as well as the wider ecosystem of science advice to Government.

The responsibilities of SAC members were discussed, particularly the 7 Principles of Public Life, and communications with the media.

The following points were clarified:

- Communicating conflicts of interests: the membership is asked to proactively share any changes in their declared interests but will be prompted yearly to update their declaration.
- SAC Agenda setting: Process between SAC Chair, CSA, and DfE, including the Permanent Secretary.
- Number of meetings: Meetings are quarterly but ad hoc meetings may be planned for urgent queries.

The SAC introduced their research interests and drivers for being on the SAC. Key DfE officials introduced themselves to the SAC.

ACTION 1.1: Membership to comment and approve the Terms of Reference and Ways of Working.

ACTION 1.2: SAC Secretariat to table a review of the SAC governance structure, Terms of Reference and Ways of Working in April 2025.

Identifying and supporting children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England – Key problems, reform ambitions and role of the SAC

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

DfE officials discussed the key policy challenges in relation to SEND, and discussion of how the SAC may be able to help followed.

ACTION 1.3: SAC Secretariat and SEND team to consider further opportunities for SAC to support the development of SEND policy, including the possibility of an online meeting in Autumn 2024.

Stephen Morgan MP, Minister for Early Education

Minister Morgan outlined his diverse portfolio, which includes early education and the childcare expansion rollout, AI and technology, mental health, sustainability, school attendance, and behaviour. He emphasized the importance of evidence-based policy and the critical role of the Science Advisory Council (SAC) in shaping and informing these policies.

First, he discussed his aim to ensure high-quality early education for all children, stressing that the early years are crucial for children's development and outcomes. He mentioned initiatives such as investment in early years settings, professional development for early years practitioners, and support for family services.

Next, he addressed the need for robust mental health support in schools and early years settings. He acknowledged the challenges posed by digital environments on mental health and emphasized the importance of implementing evidence-based interventions and promoting a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Regarding AI and technology in education, Minister Morgan discussed the potential benefits, such as reducing teacher workload and enhancing curriculum content. However, he also noted the challenges of ensuring safe and effective implementation of AI technologies. He stressed the need for rapid evidence generation to keep pace with technological advancements and to address safety concerns, which is why he is convening a group of tech companies to discuss opportunities and risks.

On the topic of school attendance and behaviour, he mentioned whole-school approaches to engagement and attendance, with metrics to monitor persistent absence and measures of school belonging.

Minister Morgan also emphasized the importance of integrating sustainability into education policies and practices. He highlighted the need to prepare students for a sustainable future and to address environmental challenges.

He underscored the importance of cross-departmental collaboration, noting that achieving the mission's goals requires working with various government departments, such as the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

Minister Morgan highlighted the potential for linking data across health, education, and social care to improve outcomes and inform policy. He stressed the importance of rapid evidence generation to keep up with technological advancements and changing needs.

Finally, he discussed the importance of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, including local authorities, tech companies, and social partners like teaching unions. He encouraged SAC members to build trust and collaborate effectively to speak truth to power.

In conclusion, Minister Morgan reiterated the importance of evidence-based policy and the SAC's role in shaping these policies. He encouraged members to continue their valuable work and to focus on the key priorities outlined in his address.

Opportunity Mission

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The SAC was introduced to and discussed the Opportunity Mission as well as the evidence and metrics underpinning it. The department is developing Research and Development priorities for the mission.

ACTION 1.4: SAC secretariat to invite membership to input into Opportunity Mission R&D Priorities via correspondence and table a conversation at the next plenary meeting.

Closing remarks by the SAC Chair

The SAC Chair summarised the key discussion points in this inaugural meeting, and commented on the need to consider the structure and duration of future meetings.

The SAC Chair referred to the discussions on SEND, which were particularly rich, and highlighted the interconnectedness of health, education, and social care. The SAC will need to do more work on SEND in the future.

ACTION 5: SAC Secretariat and SAC Chair to review the structure and duration of plenary meetings.

Meeting Adjourned. The next meeting will be held on 27 January 2025 in London.

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