



Department
for Education

Minutes of the Department for Education Science Advisory Council – April 2025

Committee: Department for Education Science Advisory Council

Meeting number: 003

Date: 7 April 2025

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
Dougal Hargreaves
Sonya Krutikova
Rose Luckin
Amy Orben
Paul Ramchandani
Michael J. Reiss

DfE Officials

Russell Viner – Chief Scientific Adviser
Sir Kevan Collins – Lead Non-Executive Board Member
Ian Knowles – Chief Analyst and Director of Strategic Analysis, Research, Data, Insights and Science (SARDIS)
Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (Natural Sciences) and Head of the Science Team
SAC Secretariat

DfE Officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

Curriculum & Assessment Review

Jacque Spatcher – Deputy Director of High Quality Curriculum, Schools Group
Policy Lead for the Curriculum and Assessment Review
Lead Analyst for the Curriculum & Assessment Review

Opportunity Mission update

Lead for Opportunity Mission planning, performance and PMO

Skills

Frank Bowley – Deputy Director in Shadow Skills England

External attendees in relation to specific agenda discussion

SEND

Professor Karen Guldberg – Chair of DfE Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group and Head of the School of Education and Professor of Autism Studies at the University of Birmingham

Dame Christine Lenehan – Strategic SEND Adviser to the Department for Education

Apologies

Michael Cribb – SAC member

Actions arising

- **ACTION 3.1:** SAC Secretariat to organise for the Future of Childhood team to present to the SAC.
- **ACTION 3.2:** Amy Orben to circulate her research paper on minimum viable evidence with the SAC.
- **ACTION 3.3:** SAC secretariat to involve Claire Crawford, Dougal Hargreaves and Sonya Krutikova in the CSA chaired Task and Finish Group which will cover our current understanding and data on the impact, drivers, and future outcomes for children, young people, and parents experiencing ill health and how this relates to economic inactivity both now (e.g. care), and into the future.
- **ACTION 3.4:** SAC Secretariat and Mission Delivery Team to work to embed the SAC in the Mission's Evaluation Strategy.
- **ACTION 3.5:** SAC to suggest alternative data sources to understand skills needs.
- **ACTION 3.6:** SAC Members to share reflections and ideas about the work of the SAC via correspondence.
- **ACTION 3.7:** CSA, SAC Chair and SAC Secretariat to review how we are working, what is working well, and what can be improved, and to put recommendations in practice for the June 2025 meeting.

Chair's welcome

Minutes of the previous meeting were approved. The following potential conflicts of interests relating to the day's agenda were declared by the membership:

- Athene Donald is Chair of the Science Educators Policy Alliance, which has met with the Curriculum & Assessment Review.

- Mark Mon-Williams has had discussions with ESRC about a potential project for the R&D Missions Program (RDMP)
- Rose Luckin has been invited to join the DfE Task and Finish Group on AI and EdTech, which is linked to the Curriculum & Assessment Review. She is also working with the AI Security Institute.
- Paul Ramchandani is a member of the Foundations What Works Centre for Children and Families.

Athene Donald informed the membership that she has joined the Opportunity Mission Expert Reference Group (OMERG) *ex officio*, which held its first meeting on 3 April 2025. The discussion focused on Attendance and Place.

Introduction from Sir Kevan Collins, Lead Non-executive Director to DfE

Sir Kevan Collins is the lead non-executive director of the DfE board. He emphasized his commitment to evidence-based policy and practice in education. He highlighted key issues such as inclusion, the role of technology in education, family engagement, and the importance of post-16 non-academic routes for economic growth. He emphasised his desire for the SAC to provide friendly challenge to the DfE.

Update from the DfE Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), Russell Viner

The CSA provided an update on various workstreams and areas of interest within the department:

- **Opportunity Mission and R&D:** Finalizing R&D returns for the Spending Review and coordinating SR bids with other CSAs and GCSA.
- **SEND&AP:** Supporting the development of DfE's reform to the SEND&AP system.
- **Children's Wellbeing and Mental Health:** Investigating the impact of smartphones and social media on young people and advising on anti-bullying initiatives.
- **Health:** Supporting the DfE team engaging with the COVID Inquiry and collaborating on the Adolescent Health Study.
- **Skills:** Discussing Skills and Opportunity Mission with the Council for Science and Technology and co-chairing a group on Economic Inactivity and Health in Young People.
- **Other Initiatives:** Advising GO Science on the Future of Childhood foresight project, focusing on data and digital initiatives.

ACTION 3.1: SAC Secretariat to organise for the Future of Childhood team to present to the SAC.

Brief roundtable updates on relevant DfE work

- **SEND:** Mark Mon-Williams gave evidence to the House of Lords in relation to the Autism Act 2009.
- **Opportunity Mission:** Claire Crawford has joined the expert advisory group for Best Start in Life with DfE, which overlaps with the SAC's work on SEND.
- **Young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET):** Dougal Hargreaves is working with the People's Health Trust on a national project to support young people with mild to moderate mental health difficulties.
- **Health:** The SAC discussed the dissolution of NHS England and the importance of considering programs for children's health holistically, rather than being part of wider, separate policy on health issues (e.g. obesity, mental health etc).

ACTION 3.2: Amy Orben to circulate her research paper on minimum viable evidence with the SAC.

ACTION 3.3: SAC secretariat to involve Claire Crawford, Dougal Hargreaves and Sonya Krutikova in the CSA chaired Task and Finish Group which will cover our current understanding and data on the impact, drivers, and future outcomes for children, young people, and parents experiencing ill health and how this relates to economic inactivity both now (e.g. care), and into the future.

Curriculum & Assessment Review

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The Secretary of State for Education commissioned Becky Francis to perform the Curriculum & Assessment Review in July 2024. The review published its interim report in March 2025, with the full recommendations expected in Autumn 2025. The SAC discussed the interim report and the next stages of the Review.

Opportunity Mission

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The Opportunity Mission continues to be a priority for DfE, with a particular focus on the Best Start in Life pillar this parliament. The SAC was provided with an update on the delivery of the Opportunity Mission.

ACTION 3.4: SAC Secretariat and Mission Planning Team to work to embed the SAC in the Mission's Evaluation Strategy.

SEND Working Group Update

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Professor Karen Guldberg and Dame Christine Lenehan introduced themselves to the SAC and discussed the work of the Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group, the ADHD

Taskforce and the work to build inclusivity in mainstream education, as well as join-up opportunities.

Skills England

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Skills England is a newly established Arm's Length Body. Its role is to assess and address the UK's skills needs, ensuring qualifications align with economic demands and engaging with regional authorities to align local and national strategies. Skills England colleagues presented their analysis on England's skills gaps, and the SAC had a broad ranging discussion on the work on Skills England.

ACTION 3.5: SAC to suggest alternative data sources to understand skills needs.

Closing remarks by the SAC Chair

The Chair invited the membership to discuss the work of the SAC. The conversation focused on the need to prioritise work areas. The Membership discussed the importance of setting clear questions in advance to make discussions more productive and actionable. There was also a suggestion to have written outputs with a request for policy teams to respond formally, ensuring that insights drive policy changes effectively.

ACTION 3.6: SAC Members to share reflections and ideas about the work of the SAC via correspondence.

ACTION 3.7: CSA, SAC Chair and SAC Secretariat to review how we are working, what is working well, and what can be improved, and to put recommendations in practice for the June 2025 meeting.

Meeting Adjourned. The next meeting will be held on 30 June 2025 in London.