



Department
for Education

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

Committee: Department for Education Science Advisory Council

Meeting number: 002

Date: 27 January 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
Michael Cribb
Dougal Hargreaves
Sonya Krutikova
Rose Luckin
Amy Orben
Paul Ramchandani

DfE Officials

Russell Viner – DfE Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
Ian Knowles – Chief Analyst and Director of Strategic Analysis, Research, Data, Insights and Science (SARDIS)
Michele Weatherburn – Deputy Director of the Central Analysis & Research Division (CARD) and Chief Research Officer
Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (Social Sciences) and Head of the Central Research Unit
Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (Natural Sciences) and Head of the Science Team
SAC Secretariat

DfE officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

Artificial Intelligence

AI Alignment Lead
Digital Strategy Lead

Areas of Research Interest

Data Access and Engagement Programme Manager

Apologies

Michael J. Reiss – SAC Member

Actions arising

ACTION 2.1: Secretariat to organise a meeting for Athene Donald, Mark Mon-Williams, Dougal Hargreaves, Paul Ramchandany and Sonya Krutikova with the SEND team, Juliet Chua, Director General for Schools Groups, and Alison Ismail, Director for SEND.

ACTION 2.2: SAC Deputy Chair to share slides with membership ahead of the meeting with SEND team.

ACTION 2.3: SAC to produce a paper highlighting use cases for a Single Unique Identifier.

ACTION 2.4: SAC Secretariat and AI team to consider further involvement for the SAC in supporting the development of AI policy, including the possibility of an online meeting before the next plenary SAC meeting in April 2025

ACTION 2.5: Detailed comments to the Areas of Research Interests (ARI) to be shared via correspondence by 31 January; colleagues from Central Analysis and Research Division to consider and amend the ARI.

ACTION 2.6: SAC Secretariat and SAC Chair to evaluate the SAC Ways of Working on an ongoing basis.

Chair's welcome

The SAC Chair welcomed attendees to the second meeting of the DfE Science Advisory Council.

The Chair reminded the membership of the importance of transparency regarding conflicts of interests and asked members to declare any conflicts arising from the day's agenda, of which there were none.

Minutes of the previous meeting were approved, and there were no matters arising.

Introduction to DfE's Chief Analyst

The Chief Analyst described his background in various departments including ONS, Ministry of Justice, Energy and Climate Change, Transport, and Education. His role involves leading the central analytical function, professional oversight of the analysis function in the department, and ensuring the quality of statistics, evidence, modelling, evaluation and analytical advice.

Brief roundtable updates on relevant DfE work

- **SEND:** Mark Mon-Williams updated the membership on SAC workstreams, and highlighted the need for coordination between the DfE SAC, DfE's Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group and NHS England's ADHD taskforce.
- **Place Workshop:** Mark Mon-Williams noted that he had presented his work on local connected datasets, and the importance of considering place-based approaches in educational policy and interventions to John Edwards, Director General of Regions Group in DfE.
- **Single Unique Identifier:** DfE is piloting using a single unique identifier number for children across services.
- **Impact of new technology on young people:** Amy Orben is leading a large consortium funded by DSIT to understand the impact of new technology, especially social media and smartphones, on young people. The consortium is conducting a systematic review of the literature, focusing on mental health and well-being, and considering the broader impacts on health and education, with the aim to establish standards of evidence in this space. Amy is also involved in a smaller DSIT project to determine what constitutes an unhealthy amount of smartphone use by considering the displacement of essential activities for a healthy life.

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Update from the DfE Chief Scientific Adviser

The Chief Scientific Adviser provided an update on various workstreams and areas of interest within the department. He highlighted that the profile of the Scientific Advisory Council (SAC) is rising within the department.

- **Research Round Tables and Engagement:** Numerous round tables are being organized on various topics, including bullying, reproductive and sexual health education (RSHE), and school absence.
- **Opportunity Mission:** The mission aims to address barriers to opportunity and improve educational outcomes. The R&D Missions Programme (RDMP) has secured funding of £25 million to be spent from April. Some of this may be allocated to Opportunity Mission.
- **SEND:** The department remains focused on SEND, working to address challenges to the system with scientific input from the CSA.
- **Mental health:** Various policy areas considering its impact on behaviour, bullying, and overall wellbeing.
- **School Food and Obesity:** There is growing interest in school food and obesity, driven by initiatives from the Chief Medical Officer. This area is linked to the Health Mission and involves collaboration with other departments.

- **Pandemic Preparedness:** The department is engaging with Module 8 of the COVID-19 Inquiry, which focuses on children and young people, and is working on its pandemic preparedness plans.
- **Healthy and Resilient Learning Environments:** A working group has been established to focus on healthy and resilient learning environments, addressing issues such as ventilation, heating, and adaptation to environmental threats.
- **Educational Outcomes Panel Study (EOPS):** Three longitudinal cohort studies funded by the department, covering early years, primary education, and adolescence. The DfE is exploring the potential for a new post-16 cohort study.
- **Screen Time and Digital Use:** There is significant interest in the impact of screen time and digital use on young people, with ongoing research and policy discussions in this area.

Artificial Intelligence

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Rose Luckin, an expert in the field of AI in Education, gave an overview of the current research landscape. Colleagues from DfE presented the government and the department's AI strategy. The SAC then discussed how DfE can better engage with academics, including the SAC.

ACTION 2.4: SAC Secretariat and AI team to consider further involvement for the SAC in supporting the development of AI policy, including the possibility of an online meeting before the next plenary SAC meeting in April 2025

Areas of Research Interest (ARI)

Background on the development of the ARI

The areas of research interest (ARI) aim to describe the department's research priorities. Previous versions were published in 2018, and under the previous government in January 2024, which was in use until the General Election. DfE officials introduced a draft of updated ARI reflecting ongoing evidence needs and new priorities for comment by the SAC.

Comments from the membership

The membership provided high-level feedback on the framing and structure of the document including the need to incorporate high-level framing and cross-cutting themes more prominently, as well as ensuring consistency in the level of detail across different sections.

ACTION 2.5: Detailed comments to be shared via correspondence by 31 January; DfE officials to consider and amend the ARI.

Spending Review Phase 2 – Research & Development

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Colleagues are using the government's Missions and the Spending Review as an opportunity to update the department's approach to R&D. Work to date has identified key areas where additional investment in R&D is expected to yield the greatest benefit to the Opportunity Mission over the multi-year Spending Review period. The SAC provided feedback on the current strategy and priorities.

Closing remarks by the SAC Chair

The Chair concluded the meeting by emphasizing the importance of the discussions and the valuable input provided by all participants.

They highlighted the need for the regular evaluation of the SAC's ways of working.

ACTION 2.6: SAC Secretariat and SAC Chair to evaluate the SAC Ways of Working on an ongoing basis.

Meeting Adjourned. The next meeting will be held on 7 April 2025 in London.

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