

AESAC Meeting

17 July 2025

09:30-10:30

MS Teams

For Information

These minutes are an accurate record of this meeting of the Committee, but some information has been summarised or redacted as it is sensitive and/or related to ongoing work.

Note of Meeting

Agenda item: **Welcome, introductions and matters arising** Presenter: Co-Chair

1 Welcome, introductions and matters arising.

- 1.1 The Co-Chair thanked all attendees for being able to attend the meeting online, rather than the intended in person meeting.
- 1.2 The Co-Chair noted apologies for this meeting, including the apologies received from the CSA.
- 1.3 An AESAC member declared an ongoing interest in that they host refugees.
- 1.4 Attendees and apologies for this meeting are noted in Appendix A.

Agenda item: **Minutes and actions from the previous meeting**

Presenter: Co-Chair

2 Minutes and actions from the previous meeting

- 2.1 Co-Chair asked for any comments on the April Quarterly meeting minutes before they could be signed off as an accurate record of the meeting.
- 2.2 An AESAC member flagged a minor error in the minutes where her name had been misspelt.
- 2.3 Secretariat confirmed that this error would be amended as soon as possible.
- 2.4 An AESAC member indicated the April minutes, had incorrectly noted she had a conflict of interest; however, Secretariat had verified it was not a conflicting interest.
- 2.5 **Action 2025_07_17_#01: Secretariat to amend the April 2025 AESAC minutes as outlined above.**
- 2.6 Subject to these amendments, the committee Co-chairs confirmed with all attendees including policy representatives the draft April meeting open session minutes be agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.
- 2.7 The Co-Chair advised an updated action log had been provided by Secretariat ahead of the meeting.

2.8 The Co-Chair advised that progress on a number of the actions within the action log are contingent on engagement from other groups, which has not been forthcoming. This has resulted in several outstanding actions remaining as 'pending.'

2.9 Secretariat confirmed they were proposing several long-standing actions that had failed to be progressed could be closed.

2.10 AESAC members questioned why all current actions from the open session meetings should be closed in this manner.

2.11 Secretariat indicated the length of time taken to progress some of the outstanding actions would suggest it might be more expedient to request these actions be closed.

2.12 Policy officers suggested that it might be more useful to hold the discussion about the actions log after the updates from the Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser and Policy Team, respectively.

2.13 The Co-Chair agreed with this approach and stated that they would return to this agenda item later in the meeting.

Agenda item: **Co-Chairs' update**

Presenter: Co-Chair

3 Chair's update

DNA methylation report

3.1 The Co-Chair stated that the DNA Methylation Report and accompanying Research Template are currently awaiting the Chief Scientific Adviser's review. AESAC members suggested these documents had been awaiting review for a while, the Co-chair asked the DCSA for an update on the status of this report.

3.2 The Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA) stated that the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) was unable to attend this meeting due to an emergency. However, he would ensure that the DNA Methylation Report and accompanying Research Template are both reviewed by the CSA as soon as possible. The CSA commended AESAC members for the dedicated commitment involved in producing the DNA methylation report and research template.

3.3 **Action 2025_07_17_#02: Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser to follow up with the Chief Scientific Adviser's office, to ensure that the DNA Methylation Report and accompanying Research Template are both reviewed as soon as possible.**

Fortnightly meeting on Impacts of Trauma

3.4 The Co-Chair confirmed that AESAC members led a fortnightly meeting in June regarding the impacts of trauma on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). This meeting covered: the impact of migration journeys, data challenges in the outcomes of those journeys and the asylum seekers themselves, and ethical challenges. The meeting also focused on the current process from the perspective of social worker involvement.

3.5 The Co-Chair asked Policy representatives if they would like the notes from this meeting.

- 3.6 Policy officers confirmed that the notes to this meeting would be very helpful.
- 3.7 **Action 2025_07_17_#03: Secretariat to provide Policy with the notes from the fortnightly meeting about the impacts of trauma on UASC.**

AESAC and Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group (BFEG) Reference Group on FAE

- 3.8 The Co-Chair indicated that BFEG and AESAC members met to discuss the findings of the Home Office's report on FAE technology research. A member of the Home Office Biometrics team attended this meeting. AESAC members noted that several of the questions posed in the discussion needed to be addressed by Policy but there was no representative from Policy at that meeting.
- 3.9 The co-chair and AESAC members discussed concerns about FAE technology and the internal Home Office testing and report. Policy responded to these concerns and confirmed that there is ongoing policy development including further testing and validation and assurance processes.
- 3.10 AESAC members raised concerns about the statistical aspects of the testing and offered to provide a report to assist policy.
- 3.11 **Action 2025_07_17_#04: AESAC member to draft the statistical review/report on the FAE technology findings report, subject to a formal request from Policy.**
- 3.12 AESAC members reiterated on behalf of the committee that FAE is a form of scientific age estimation and requested further detail on the sample sizes and data visualisations in the FAE technology report.

Agenda item: Update from the Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser

Presenter: NM

4 Update from the Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser

- 4.1 The DCSA gave apologies on the CSA's behalf and confirmed that the CSA has collated an update to which is being shared through the DCSA. He also advised the CSA was available to meet with members of AESAC for a meeting with her in the future, should they wish.
- 4.1 The DCSA advised that the Home Office has been undertaking a review of its arm's-length bodies. Although the AESAC is not included in this review, given the ministerial shift in focus from biological age assessment to the use of FAE, the future of the committee has nevertheless been under consideration
- 4.2 The DCSA acknowledged the valuable contributions of AESAC to the scientific work on age assessment to date. He expressed his hope that members of the committee would remain engaged with the Home Office in future work. He emphasised the importance of maintaining appropriate scientific expertise within the department to

ensure that all work related to age assessment continues to be undertaken in a robust and scientifically sound manner.

- 4.3 Policy officers also thanked AESAC members for their work in challenging ministers and Policy representatives on the limited efficacy, accuracy, and deliverability of biological age assessment methods. This also included on-going debates on how consent could be obtained from minors to undergo X-ray and MRIs. Policy officers indicated this committee was originally set up to examine the effectiveness of x-rays and MRIs to assess age and this element is no longer the primary focus of the Home Office and given the impact of the spending review, it has become challenging to justify the cost of the committee.
- 4.4 Policy officers confirmed the CSA, DCSA and Policy team continue to be aware of the need for appropriate statistical and rigorous analysis of FAE technology. It was confirmed by the DCSA that the CSA would think about how to appropriately retain the level of expertise within AESAC across other committees within the Home Office.
- 4.5 Policy officers also confirmed that at the time of this meeting the announcement of AESAC being stood down was confidential and requested that committee members maintain this confidentiality. There would shortly be a Ministerial announcement regarding age assessment processes. Policy also confirmed they had greatly valued the intellectual debate and expertise provided by the committee members.

Agenda item: Q&A Session

Presenter:

5 Q&A Session

- 5.1 There was a discussion of the decision to close the committee, official's ongoing priorities in the age estimation space, and the need for scientific expertise and advice in this policy area. AESAC members asked for clarification of the HO's differentiation of 'scientific', 'biological' and 'technological' methods.
- 5.2 AESAC members highlighted that within the committee's original remit facial ageing, DNA methylation and radiological age estimation were all named and classified as 'biological age assessment.'
- 5.3 Policy Officers responded that the funding for AESAC was not related to the division between 'biological age assessment' and 'scientific age assessment.' Policy updated that a decision has been made to focus on and drive funding towards expertise relevant to FAE. Simultaneously, policy officers confirmed it is hoped that some of the committee's expertise will be retained within the Home Office.
- 5.4 AESAC members endorsed the concept that FAE technology does have advantages. However, because FAE is based on science, members repeated the need for any further work on FAE to be scientifically rigorous. There was a discussion of current and future methods, and the need for expert advice.
- 5.5 AESAC members suggested that DNA methylation could be utilised as an alternative age estimation method and as a comparator against FAE technology, however it was accepted this option would be far more expensive. AESAC members indicated the

reason for committee members opting to recommend imaging to scientifically assess age was because there was evidence to support this in peer-reviewed journals.

- 5.6 There was a discussion of the internal testing of the FAE technology, and the potential limitations of the technology.
- 5.7 AESAC members highlighted the level of expertise on the committee. Committee members can both understand science and translate science into a form that is understandable for policymakers for practical application. AESAC requested specific note in the minutes that any ongoing work looking at age assessment in the UASC population continues to have expertise from front-line individuals who have experiences of working with this population who have an understanding of complex health and child development profiles as well as child rights. Anything that involves being purely scientifically accurate but not practically applicable in the real world will not be of any value. Therefore, it is important to maintain the level of expertise that is within AESAC.
- 5.8 The DCSA affirmed a commitment to ensuring that the correct expertise is maintained within the Home Office to ensure that age assessment policy around UASC is both scientifically accurate and appropriate in ensuring complex health profiles, child development profiles and child rights are respected.
- 5.9 Policy officers added that last week they had met with the Department of Education to speak about next steps around age assessment. There is a strong impetus to maintain the social work and child development expertise in relation to scientific age assessment.
- 5.10 AESAC members responded that representation from the paediatric medical community is a good link between the scientific, health and social elements that need to be taken into consideration. Concern was expressed by the AESAC members if future work on age assessment did not involve input from front-line social care professionals as well as frontline medical professionals with expertise in this area.
- 5.11 AESAC Co-Chairs indicated policy officers had made a compelling argument on the cost efficiency FAE technology would bring as well as the reduced impact of delays and re-traumatisation on UASC but raised concerns about how useful it would be based on the current testing.
- 5.12 The committee asked about the content of the Written Ministerial Statement due to be issued on FAE; policy representatives were unable to confirm the final wording of this announcement at the meeting.
- 5.13 AESAC members asked for further context regarding the decision to close the committee and urged officials to continue to consider DNA methylation and X-ray/MRI methods, acknowledging the cost and wider issues.
- 5.14 AESAC members suggested that the extent of the margin of error for FAE technology should be explained to ministers and the end user with transparency. The technology should have the appropriate caveats in place when it is utilised.
- 5.15 DCSA confirmed the CSA's commitment to the importance of an appropriate assurance process using the right expertise the technology is of the highest standard prior to FAE technology implementation.

5.16 The National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) also confirmed for AESAC that local authorities are still conducting their own assessments. NAAB do not conduct all age assessments. NAAB are not aware of how many age assessments local authorities undertake, as this data is not collated within the Home Office.

Agenda item: Actions log review.

Presenter: Co-Chair

6 Actions log review

6.1 It was confirmed by the AESAC members that all actions not associated with AESAC closedown would be closed, only outstanding actions related to the appropriate and transparent shutdown process would remain open.

Agenda item: Secretariat update and next steps

Presenter: Co-Chair

7 Secretariat update and next steps

7.1 The Co-Chair asked if the DNA methylation report and accompanying research template would be published, given that the committee is being stood down.

7.2 Secretariat confirmed that the DNA Methylation report and accompanying research template will go on the website alongside outstanding minutes and notification of AESAC's closure.

7.3 The Co-Chair asked what the message around the committee's closure would be and when that would happen.

7.4 Policy officers confirmed that the wording around the committee's closure had not been drafted yet, once drafted the CSA will share with the committee members prior to publication.

7.5 **Action 2025_07_17_#05: Policy representative to share the wording for AESAC's closure with Secretariat and committee members.**

7.6 AESAC Co-Chair asked when the committee honorarium payments would remain in place until.

7.7 The DCSA advised a formal end date would be confirmed for AESAC members.

7.8 **Action 2025_07_17_#06: Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser to agree a formal end date for AESAC.**

7.9 AESAC Co-Chair requested clarification on the next steps and requirements for AESAC members, particularly regarding the retention of skills and expertise within AESAC that had been referenced by the DSCA and policy officers.

7.10 The DCSA confirmed that this was something the CSA was reviewing and that AESAC members could potentially be co-opted onto other committees which would be convenient given the members had already successfully applied for committee roles. This remains under consideration and would need to be completed prior to the official closure of AESAC. Additionally, he confirmed this would include the publication of the DNA methylation report on the AESAC website.

- 7.11 **Action 2025_07_17_#07: DCSA and CSA to consider how to best retain AESAC's expertise within the Home Office.**
- 7.12 Secretariat confirmed the team would be available to support committee members in liaison with the DCSA and Policy officers through this transitional process.

AOB

Presenter: Co-Chair

7 AOB

- 7.1 A committee member asked if there would be a closed session in relation to this meeting.
- 7.2 A Closed session link was provided for the AESAC members to join shortly after the open session of the meeting closed.
- 7.3 Meeting Closed

Appendix A

Attendees: AESAC members

Lucina Hackman (Chair)
Stuart Boyd (Co-Chair)
Denise Syndercombe-Court
Allison Ward
Sally Andrews
Tim Cole
Tabitha Randell

Present (Home Office (HO) officials and Stakeholders)

AESAC Secretary and Secretariat
Home Office Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser
Home Office Policy representatives

Apologies: AESAC Member(s)

Liam Way
Home Office Chief Scientific Adviser