



Department
for Education

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

Committee: Department for Education Science Advisory Council

Meeting number: 004

Date: 30 June 2025

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

Attendees

Athene Donald (Chair)

Mark Mon-Williams (Deputy Chair)

Chris Bonell

William J. Browne

Claire Crawford

Michael Cribb

Dougal Hargreaves

Sonya Krutikova

Paul Ramchandani

Michael J. Reiss

Russell Viner – DfE 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)

DfE Officials

Apologies

Rose Luckin – SAC member

Amy Orben – SAC member

Actions arising

- **ACTION 4.1:** SAC Secretariat to implement the agreed changes to the Ways of Working.
- **ACTION 4.2:** SAC Secretariat to scope DfE Senior Civil Servant demand for the pairing scheme and implement the pairing scheme.
- **ACTION 4.3:** SAC Secretariat to investigate opportunities for SACs across government to network and/or work together.
- **ACTION 4.4:** EOPS team to produce a briefing document and data dictionary for the SAC to share within their existing networks.

- **ACTION 4.5:** EOPS team and Secretariat to explore organising a workshop for the SAC to develop research questions of interest to DfE that could be addressed using EOPS data, for dissemination.
- **ACTION 4.6:** SAC Membership to share relevant contacts and materials for the Future of Childhood and Adolescence Team to engage with.
- **ACTION 4.9:** SAC Membership to comment on the draft report of the Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group.
- **ACTION 4.12:** SAC to feed into the development of the Decision-Making Framework, via correspondence or through a follow-up item at a plenary meeting.
- **ACTION 4.13:** SAC Secretariat to work with Resilience colleagues to formalise how the department can access their advice in an emergency.

Welcome and updates

The Chair opened the meeting. Minutes were approved. The SAC agreed that minutes from plenary meetings should be published on the group's GOV.UK page.

The Secretariat led a discussion on outstanding actions from previous meetings. It was agreed that Claire Crawford and Dougal Hargreaves will be leading on delivering *Action 2.3: SAC to produce a paper highlighting use cases for a Single Unique Identifier*.

The Secretariat introduced updates to the Ways of Working document. The SAC approved the process for SAC members to raise agenda items. The SAC agreed to keep activities records and to share them with the Secretariat upon request. The SAC agreed to pilot a SAC member – DfE Senior Civil Servant Pairing Scheme.

ACTION 4.1: SAC Secretariat to implement the agreed changes to the Ways of Working.

ACTION 4.2: SAC Secretariat to scope DfE Senior Civil Servant demand for the pairing scheme and implement the pairing scheme.

The Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) gave a short overview of his work in the last quarter, highlighting the following points:

- CSA recruitment: A new CSA for DfE will be announced in the coming months, with an expected start date in December 2025.
 - R&D Mission Accelerator Programme (R&D MAP): £500 million were allocated to the R&D MAP over four years.
- Departmental R&D Funding: Initial settlements indicate that DfE has increased its R&D funding in the next spending review period, which is a very positive outcome considering fiscal constraints.
- Research Centres: DfE has developed plans to fund new research centres, in the vein of the NIHR's Policy Research Units.
- Education Research Funders Forum: The CSA is chairing this initiative to coordinate education research funding across UKRI, Nuffield, Leverhulme, and others, with the goal to align agendas and grow investment in education research.

The SAC provided updates on work with or relevant to DfE:

- Athene Donald met with the Permanent Secretary who expressed a desire for the SAC to produce briefing papers for departmental leadership. The Chair attended the Opportunity Mission Expert Reference Group meeting focused on keeping children safe. The Chair and the CSA met with CSAs from other departments.
- Claire Crawford continued advising on the “Best Start in Life” strategy. She is also working with colleagues on data development efforts related to the Opportunity Mission.
- Michael Reiss is chairing the Climate Change and Sustainability Expert Advisory Group, which will provide an expert view of the evidence landscape and shape evidence-informed recommendations to support the development of DfE’s refreshed Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy.
- Mark Mon-Williams has been working with attendance colleagues in DfE and noted his involvement in related roundtables and public health discussions.
- Dougal Hargreaves discussed meetings with NHS England on integrated child health services, with implications for mental health, SEND, and school attendance.

Members discussed the potential for SAC members to collaborate across departments, as a formal mechanism already exists between Chairs of SACs. Joint meetings with other SACs on cross-cutting issues, such as screen time, may be organised in the future.

ACTION 4.3: SAC Secretariat to discuss opportunities for SACs across government to network and/or work together.

The SAC expressed the desire to get involved in follow-up work from research roundtables on topics like bullying, belonging, and thriving.

Educational Outcomes Panel Studies (EOPS)

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

EOPS are a group of longitudinal studies commissioned by DfE to understand how children and young people in England develop over time, with a focus on education, well-being, mental health, and life outcomes. DfE officials introduced the studies and initial findings and the SAC proposed ways to increase engagement from the research community,

ACTION 4.4: EOPS team to produce a briefing document and data dictionary for the SAC to share with their networks.

ACTION 4.5: EOPS team and Secretariat to explore organising a workshop for the SAC to develop research questions of interest to DfE that could be addressed using EOPS data, for dissemination.

Future of Childhood and Adolescence

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Colleagues from the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) presented an overview of the "Future of Childhood and Adolescence" foresight project, which is part of a long-standing series of cross-cutting studies aimed at informing government policy through evidence and scenario planning. The project aims to explore broad societal trends affecting

children and young people, including climate change, security, demographics, health, and digital life, but will not be making direct policy recommendations.

ACTION 4.6: SAC Membership to share relevant contacts and materials for the Future of Childhood and Adolescence Team to engage with.

SEND Working Group Update

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The SAC working group on SEND updated on the work it has been doing to support ongoing work on SEND in the department.

Opportunity Mission

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

DfE colleagues presented their work to develop a coherent approach to disadvantage across the Opportunity Mission. This work aims to understand how disadvantage affects learners at different stages from early childhood through to adulthood, identifying key barriers and target groups for tailored support at critical life stages.

Resilience and Pandemic Preparedness

The Department for Education is working to strengthen its pandemic preparedness, as part of a broad cross-government programme, which includes a national pandemic exercise in autumn 2025 – Exercise Pegasus.

The DfE's objectives include improving emergency response, strengthening decision-making, and ensuring that children and young people's needs are central to future pandemic planning.

The team is developing a prototype decision-making framework to guide proportionate, transparent, and evidence-based responses, to make sure that the value of continued education is factored into decisions and there is no interruption in support for vulnerable children.

Discussion and Suggestions from SAC Membership

The SAC endorsed the use of transmissibility, susceptibility, and severity as core indicators for decision-making. The SAC discussed how to inform these indicators:

- Members stressed the importance of disaggregating indicators by age and setting type such as early years, special schools, and social care settings.
- Members recommended triangulating data from multiple sources, such as daily school attendance, hospitalisation rates, primary care, to inform these indicators.
- The SAC agreed that, in a pandemic, severity would be the first of the three indicators to be informed by reliable data, with early signals including paediatric intensive care unit

(PICU) occupancy and hospitalisation rates, while transmissibility would be the most difficult to assess quantitatively.

- It was suggested that DfE work closely with DHSC, UKHSA, and NHS England to ensure data sharing and aligned responses.
- There was consensus that indicators should move from qualitative expert assessments in the early stages of an outbreak to quantitative, data-driven assessments.
- It was proposed that the decision-making framework include structured check-in points to reassess assumptions as new data emerges to avoid being locked into outdated positions.

The SAC emphasised the difficulty of making and communicating decisions in times of uncertainty:

- SAC members agreed that early decisions must often be made with limited data and recommended clearly communicating uncertainty while maintaining public trust.
- The group agreed that the balance between scientific and political considerations in decision-making should be made clear to the public.

The SAC discussed how vulnerable children must be considered in pandemic preparedness work, whether in terms of disadvantage and poverty, vulnerability to disease – for example those with complex health needs in special and/or mainstream education – and vulnerability to other harms – at home or in care. SAC members recommended developing a vulnerability index for schools to guide targeted interventions and resource allocation, as schools can play a role of community hub and support, as well as ensure continuity of learning.

The SAC had a broad-ranging conversation on the different interventions available to respond to pandemics:

- SAC members stressed that school attendance restrictions should be a last resort due to their significant long-term impacts on education, mental health, and inequality.
- Members highlighted the need to consider trade-offs of any intervention explicitly, including modelling the impact of attendance restrictions on life expectancy and educational outcomes.
- It was suggested that interventions should be tailored to local contexts, with flexibility based on school vulnerability, community health risks, and available resources.
- The SAC highlighted that Public Health and Social Measures – increased ventilation, staggered school days, amongst others – can play a key role in allowing schools to remain open, whilst reducing contacts and/or transmission
- the SAC focussed on the importance of remote education if schools were to close or restrict attendance. They recommended the department better set out expectations and standards for schools to ensure a high-quality offer, as well as a strategy for device and internet access.

The SAC was keen for the department to consider the recovery phase in its pandemic preparedness work.

The SAC reflected on the research that DfE could commission to enable the department to be better prepared and recommended the department have a mechanism to conduct and commission research during a pandemic. SAC members recommended prioritising research on:

- The long-term impacts of attendance restrictions on education and health.
- Effective remote learning strategies, especially for disadvantaged pupils. It was suggested that international innovations in remote learning, especially in conflict-affected regions, could offer valuable insights.
- Trade-offs between educational loss and public health outcomes.
- Early warning indicators and data linkage across health, education, and social care.
- Communication strategies for risk and uncertainty.
- Transmission and mitigation effectiveness in schools

The SAC is keen to engage at all stages of the development of the Decision-Making Framework, including by shaping core metrics, advising on data interpretation, and reviewing the final product. It was agreed that SAC should be consulted in preparation for Exercise Pegasus and updated on its outcomes.

SAC members reviewed the department's broader risk register and expressed interest in contributing to other high impact risks, and recommended establishing a process for involving SAC in incident response.

ACTION 4.12: SAC to feed into the development of the Decision-Making Framework, via correspondence or through a follow-up item at a plenary meeting.

ACTION 4.13: SAC Secretariat to work with Resilience colleagues to formalise how the department can access their advice in an emergency.

Closing remarks by the SAC Chair

The SAC reflected on the format of the meeting and agreed that the sessions were productive due to having ample time for discussion. The SAC liked having a balance of information sharing sessions and deep dives.

Meeting Adjourned. The next meeting will be held on 20 November 2025 in London.