



Department
for Education

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

Committee: Department for Education Science Advisory Council

Meeting number: 006

Date: 17 November 2025

Location: Hybrid meeting – in person at Sanctuary Buildings and on Microsoft Teams

Attendees

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

Russell Viner – DfE Chief Scientific Adviser

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

Susan Acland-Hood (observer) – DfE Permanent Secretary

Michael Thomas – Newly Appointed DfE Chief Scientific Adviser taking post in January 2026

DfE officials

Apologies

Michael Cribb – SAC member

Actions arising

ACTION 6.1: SAC Secretariat to update the Ways of Working and the SAC Activities Record template.

ACTION 6.2: SAC Secretariat to request glossary alongside papers from presenting teams.

ACTION 6.3: SEND subgroup to review DfE analysis on Educational Outcomes for SEND Pupils: Comparing Outcomes at Mainstream and Special School Settings Across Policy Reforms

ACTION 6.4: SAC Secretariat to invite each R&D strand back to present at future plenary meetings on a rotating basis.

ACTION 6.5: SAC Secretariat to invite Anne-Marie Canning, Opportunity Mission Challenge Director at UKRI, to introduce herself to the SAC.

ACTION 6.6: SAC Members to work with their SCS pairs to ensure feedback is incorporated into their R&D plans.

ACTION 6.7: SAC membership to share any relevant research with teams who presented at the meeting.

ACTION 6.8: SAC membership to inform the Secretariat of topics that arise in pairing meetings that should be discussed in plenary meetings.

Welcome and updates

The Chair opened the meeting. Minutes were approved.

The Secretariat led a discussion on outstanding actions from previous meetings. The Chair requested an update of the SAC Activities Record template and Ways of Working section to include outward facing work that the SAC is doing.

ACTION 6.1: SAC Secretariat to update the Ways of Working and the SAC Activities Record template.

The format of papers for the meetings was discussed, and the SAC requested a glossary in presentations to ensure clarity.

ACTION 6.2: SAC Secretariat to request glossary alongside papers from presenting teams.

Professor Michael Thomas has been appointed the new Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) in DfE and will be starting in January 2026. Michael is professor of cognitive neuroscience at Birkbeck, University of London, and has a background in bilingualism, neurodevelopmental disorders, and educational neuroscience. His interests include:

- Advancing the science of learning
- Supporting teachers with evidence-based practices
- addressing early years education (especially ages 0–2)
- SEND
- AI in education.
- School interventions.
- Implications of genetics for early identification of educational needs.

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

- Departmental R&D: DfE received an increase in R&D funding for the next Spending Review period and teams are developing their projects.
- Research Centres: DfE is now in the process of commissioning two research centres, on Educational Neuroscience and on Economics respectively.
- Exercise PEGASUS: DfE took part in the large-scale pandemic preparedness exercise, for which the CSA provided scientific advice.
- Skills: The CSA has been working with his DWP counterpart on the impact of the changes of ownership of the Skills portfolio.

Mark Mon-Williams updated the SAC on the SEND working group:

- The group reviewed the Neurodiversity Task and Finish Group report, and their feedback has been incorporated.
- The group has developed and tested a Large Language Model tool to synthesize comments and streamline feedback.
- A research report drafted by DfE analysts will be circulated for review by the SAC working group.
- Discussions are ongoing about leveraging data sets like ASQ questionnaires and early profile scores to identify early indicators of special educational needs, involving DHSC and DfE colleagues.
- A project is being launched to implement and test recommendations from the Task and Finish group report in real-world settings, aiming for better data use and more integrated services.

ACTION 6.3: SEND subgroup to review DfE analysis on educational outcomes for SEND pupils.

Rose Luckin updated the SAC on the AI working group:

- The group is working closely with DfE colleagues, including the Deputy Director for Digital Strategy for Education, with the goal to collate AI-related work across the UK to avoid duplicating existing research.
- A Delphi-style consultation is underway to identify key challenges, opportunities, and priorities, informed by school leaders and policy officers.
- Further areas of interest include: equity in relation to AI, teacher capability frameworks, AI tutoring evidence, universal digital competency, content stores, test beds, quality assurance, and cybersecurity in education.

Claire Crawford and Dougal Hargreaves updated the SAC on their work on the Single Unique Identifier and Data Strategy:

- The group initially focused on the issue of the single identifier for all children but has broadened its scope to support the development of a comprehensive data strategy for the department and across government.
- The group will collate case studies to demonstrate both operational benefits and research value of a Single Unique Identifier for children and young people.

The SAC membership provided roundtable updates of their work since the last meeting:

- Mark Mon-Williams is organising an event to showcase the importance of connected datasets.

- Amy Orben has continued working across government on Screentime policy and she is working with DfE on the potential for creating guidance for parents.
- Chris Bonell discussed the finding from a trial he ran on sexual health education, highlighting lack of specialist teachers as a key barrier.
- Claire Crawford met with senior DfE officials to discuss childcare funding and will be joining an expert reference group on the topic.
- Bill Browne is a member of the EOPS steering group, and will be giving a talk on working with Government alongside other academics.
- Dougal Hargreaves has been linking with the work done by Tom Reese on the Inclusive Education working group.
- Michael Reiss chairs the DfE Climate Change and Sustainability Education Working Group and highlighted the positive representation in the Curriculum and Assessment Review. He discussed the need for CPD and innovative solutions for teacher shortages.
- Paul Ramchandani is engaging with DfE on early years policies and the Home-Learning Environment.
- Rose Luckin met with the Chief Data and Technology Officer to discuss AI, data safety, and bias.

The pairing scheme between SAC members and Senior Civil Servants within DfE was acknowledged as a fruitful initiative.

Future of Childhood and Adolescence

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

Colleagues from the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) working on the "Future of Childhood and Adolescence" foresight project have generated a list of key drivers of change expected to shape childhood over the next 10 to 20 years. These drivers will inform scenario development, thematic evidence summaries, and systems mapping for the project.

The SAC discussed the drivers identified by the team and suggested further areas of interest that were not yet considered.

Research & Development

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The presenting team outlined the significant opportunity presented by the Department for Education's expanded research and development (R&D) programme. The programme now includes an annual allocation of £50 million, representing an increase of approximately £30 million over previous baselines, alongside additional funding from the UKRI R&D Mission Accelerator Program. The aim is to deliver system-level change and improved outcomes for children through evidence-based interventions.

The priorities were developed through extensive engagement with internal teams, external stakeholders, SAC members, and ministerial boards. Seven priority strands were confirmed:

- **SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)**
- **Strategic data and analytics**
- **Home Learning Environment**
- **EdTech Testbeds**
- **Technology impacts on child development**
- **Skills**
- **Education Estates**

The SAC discussed the plans for each strand of research.

ACTION 6.4: SAC Secretariat to invite each R&D strand back to present at future plenary meetings on a rotating basis.

ACTION 6.5: SAC Secretariat to invite Anne-Marie Canning, Opportunity Mission Challenge Director at UKRI, to introduce herself to the SAC.

ACTION 6.6: SAC Members to work with their SCS pairs to ensure feedback is incorporated into their R&D plans.

Attendance

[CLOSED ITEM – brief summary below]

The presenting team highlighted that school attendance remains a significant challenge, despite the UK having one of the world's strongest real-time attendance data systems, with daily data from all state-funded schools available for research. Despite worsening attendance since COVID-19, particularly through increases in both low-level and chronic absence, the largest improvement in attendance for a decade, with 5 million additional school days attended and 140,000 fewer persistently absent pupils were reported last year.

The SAC recommended further work on the evidence on what works, greater collaboration between education and health services, early identification of pupils at risk of persistent absence, and a better understanding of mental health, local variation, and the long-term benefits of attendance interventions.

Closing remarks by the SAC Chair

The SAC commented on the suggested agenda for the February 2026 meeting. The Secretariat asked the Membership to share topics from their pairing meetings that may be usefully brought to the SAC. The agenda is expected to include:

- Educational Estates.
- Early Years Education, including pre-school and nursery provision.
- Teacher Recruitment and retention.

ACTION 6.7: SAC membership to share any relevant research with teams who presented at the meeting.

ACTION 6.8: SAC membership to inform the Secretariat of topics that arise in pairing meetings that could be discussed in plenary meetings.

Meeting Adjourned. The next meeting will be held in February 2026 in London.

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