Department for Education

Meeting notes: Higher Education (HE) Access and Participation Task and Finish Group

Date: Thursday 09 July 2026

Time: 13:00-15:00

Location: Virtual

Chair

Professor Kathryn Mitchell, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Derby; Chair of the Higher Education (HE) Access and Participation Task and Finish Group

Members present

- Professor Anthony Moss, Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience, London South Bank University (LSBU)
- Suzannah Reeves, Pinnacle Learning Trust; Principal, Oldham Sixth Form College
- Dr Shaid Mahmood, Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Durham University
- Dr Nick Harrison, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust
- Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education
- Professor Tom Sperlinger, Academic Director for Civic Spaces, University of Bristol
- Dani Payne, Head of Education and Social Mobility, Social Market Foundation
- Professor Graeme Atherton, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, University of West London
- Ben Jordan, Director of Strategy, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)
- Dr Hollie Chandler, Director of Policy, Russell Group
- Fiona Ellison, Co-Director, Unite Foundation
- Professor Jane Harrington, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, University of Greenwich
- David Morgan, Chief Executive, Career Development Institute (CDI)

Published: October 2026

- Professor Liz Mossop, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
- Dr Brooke Storer-Church, Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE

In attendance

- Nicola Berkley, Head of Policy and Research, MillionPlus (deputising for Rachel Hewitt)
- Krisha Bainham, Head of Access and Participation Policy & Engagement, University of Derby
- Department for Education (DfE) Officials

Apologies

- Professor Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students (OfS)
- Rachel Hewitt, Chief Executive, MillionPlus
- Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), Universities UK (UUK); and President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter
- National Union of Students (NUS)

Welcome and introduction

The Chair welcomed members to the fifth meeting of the Access and Participation Task and Finish Group. The minutes from the previous meeting (08 May) were formally accepted. Acknowledgement was given to the support received from various group members and organisations, with a call for continued assistance as the group moves forward with testing and implementing solutions.

The Chair reported on her recent meeting with Minister Smith (06 July), where the direction of solutions in development was discussed. A follow up note is being prepared to secure government support for work the group wants to undertake.

Members of the group have already met formally with a range of DfE officials and the OfS to consider alignment of policy. The group will be expanding its engagement to include the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), aiming to understand the position of disadvantaged individuals, particularly those classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) including those who have Level 3 qualifications, and to develop both

national and regional approaches to interventions. The Chair referred to the report on contextual offer making published by Universities UK (UUK), the Sutton Trust, and UCAS, and noted that a request for the underpinning data had been made to understand the breadth of the sector it applied to with a view to maximising impact of the work going forward.

Minutes of previous meetings and correspondence between the group Chair and Minister Smith will be published on GOV.UK today.

Regional roundtable

There was an update about the Somerset regional roundtable. Participants had included representatives from councils, schools, training providers, and employers. The roundtable highlighted infrastructure challenges, financial pressures, and the importance of localised solutions for rural and coastal areas. Roundtable participants shared that there was a lack of available provision, and also apprenticeship opportunities, even where demand existed; similar concerns were noted in other regions such as Stoke. The LLE has the potential to be transformative, but there are concerns about how it will work practically. Perceived competition remains a challenge to collaboration. Transport difficulties and the absence of local provision were identified as significant barriers for students in rural areas, with suggestions raised as potential solutions, such as free bus passes. There is interest in funding for trailblazer activity in Somerset.

Personas

There was a presentation about the personas which have been created to reflect the diverse barriers faced by different student groups. Student groups include disabled students, those with care experience, those facing barriers due to transport and mature students. The personas will be used to stress test solutions, ensuring recommendations are not generic but address specific barriers, with plans for further workshops and refinement. The need for gap analysis to identify where interventions are effective or lacking was noted as well as the importance of involving real students to validate and refine personas. The personas will be used alongside data to identify blind spots and inform both programme design and as a means of communicating beneficiaries in the final report.

Solutions framework

The emerging solutions framework was introduced. This outlines four interlinked themes with the aim of developing a joined-up approach to greater equity in higher education access with a focus on people, places, and employers. Each theme has a solutions template, which subgroup members will contribute to. The need for coherence across the four themes was emphasised. The group is working towards having well-developed, largely stress-tested recommendations by the next meeting in late September, with ongoing opportunities for network engagement and feedback. Theme leads provided reports of progress so far.

System leadership

Discussions have been held with the Office for Students (OfS) on the move to Regional Access Partnerships, focusing on project alignment, funding, and the timing of recommendations relative to both the OfS and the Task and Finish Group. There is a plan to meet with the Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland, and colleagues in Australia to gather insights on system-wide approaches. Concerns were raised about the impact of V Levels on higher education participation, particularly for disadvantaged student groups. Conversations with DfE officials are planned. Recent data on participation rates for students from free school meal backgrounds was discussed, highlighting challenges in increasing their participation rates.

Increased supply

This work strand involves thinking about how Level 4 and 5 provision can be increased and diversified; this would include modular and flexible models, community-commissioned provision, and the need to avoid market confusion while addressing regional disparities. It was acknowledged that the three-year full-time degree model is under strain both in the UK and elsewhere. Concern was raised that individuals very far from HE may not feel that the LLE works for them with interventions such as free credits for certain individuals suggested as a means of mitigation. The need to widen participation, rather than increase social stratification was stressed.

Active learner journey management

The five solution areas for this theme were shared: higher education provider-led attainment raising; outreach which is early and often; improved careers guidance; targeted interventions; and UCAS by default. The need to consider care experienced students and the roles of professionals within local authorities was noted as well as the variability of careers support. One group member offered to share practice from their institution. The need to resist becoming over-dependent on national targets to influence student choice was raised; rather effort should concentrate on supporting students to navigate their options.

Admissions that recognise potential

There was discussion about the Access to Success project which will include good practice in contextual admissions. A need for verified data for care experienced students was highlighted, which would reduce burden for students as well as ensuing greater visibility for this student group. There was further discussion about the importance of reducing social stratification. To address this there will be exploration of access thresholds/contextual entry requirements – which are visibly lower entry requirement for students based on their background - and the potential unintended consequences of following the same model used in Scotland. There was also the hope raised that solutions could lead to standardising and supporting of how mature admissions are handled.

Leadership change in the government

The Chair noted that the regional focus of the work was likely to be supported even with a change of leadership within the government and that work was going on with DFE officials to ensure briefing would be put forward on the group's work with a view to early engagement

Next steps and actions

It is anticipated that recommendations will be fully developed for the next Task and Finish Group meeting in September.

Group members were encouraged to feed into the solutions template, either via the work strands they were part of or by contacting leads directly or through DfE officials and the Chair’s office.

In-depth discussions with the Chair were offered so members could discuss the solutions more broadly and how they align with each other.

Members were asked to liaise with their own networks to stress-test proposals.

Personas will be refined and shared with the group.

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