

Education Secretary launches new attendance alliance

The Education Secretary has today, Thursday 09 December, hosted the first meeting of leading experts working with children to improve school attendance.

All members of the new attendance alliance pledged to engage with their members, stakeholders and the professionals they represent to make sure they are following best practice in improving attendance within their day-to-day work.

Although recent trends in attendance levels have been largely driven by covid, which is outside the scope of the work of the alliance, the government is determined to address the wider underlying causes of children not being in school, because it is the best place for their development and wellbeing. Persistent absence increased to 16.3% in secondary schools in autumn 2020, compared with 15.0% in 2019, not including non-attendance in covid circumstances.

At the close of the meeting, the alliance members, including Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman, Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel De Souza and Chief Social Worker Isabelle Trowler, issued a joint call on all those that engage with children, whether as a parent, teacher, GP, police officer, social worker or anything else – to work together to break down any barriers they find to them being in school for every possible day.

There are a variety of factors which could affect school attendance, such as anxiety exacerbated by the pandemic, mental health issues, children's home life and issues at school like bullying. The alliance has brought together those who have the power and expertise to effect change across the full spectrum of issues.

There is a [wide range of evidence](#) as to the health and wellbeing benefits of school-age education, and the Chief Medical Officers have [been clear](#) that time out of school can hold back young people's development and wellbeing.

Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said:

Where children aren't in school without good reason or don't want to be in school something has gone substantially wrong and needs fixing. This new attendance alliance includes the people with the power to do just that.

They will be working over the coming months to make sure everyone working on the ground with children, as a teacher, football coach, mental health worker or in any other role, has the tools and resources they need to break down barriers to children attending school.

I will continue to prioritise taking action to make sure children have the opportunity to spend time in class with inspirational teachers and good friends – simply because it is the single most powerful tool at our disposal to make sure every child fulfils their potential.

This work follows the Education Secretary's commitment when he came into post that he couldn't and wouldn't let attendance fall, as children's education is too important.

The first alliance meeting began with analysis of data and evidence compiled from member organisations, and consideration of how members can exert their combined influence to address the issues identified.

Departmental data was presented that showed persistent absence can vary significantly across single areas, with some neighbouring local authorities having very different rates from each other.

Rachel De Souza, the Children's Commissioner, presented insights around school attendance from the Big Ask, the biggest survey of children ever conducted. Those with the power to drive change effectively heard directly from children about the issues standing in the way of them consistently going to school.

Children's Commissioner Rachel De Souza said:

As one girl told me in The Big Ask, 'people don't realise how much education is important for life in general...if they don't learn in school, they might not be able to enjoy life to the fullest'.

With this in mind, I was really pleased to bring children's voices and experiences to life at today's inaugural attendance alliance meeting. Over the last 18 months it has become clear that any vulnerable child being out of school can have a serious impact, which is why attendance is my number one priority.

Attendance needs to be everyone's business – it's not just an abstract metric, and we must do everything we can – at national, local and school level – to make sure children are in school, every day, and ready to learn. Not just for their future, but for their wellbeing and safety too.

Amanda Spielman, Ofsted Chief Inspector, also spoke about the draft findings of her review into best practice by schools, due to be published in the New Year. She noted that the specific approaches taken by schools vary, but they tend to have a number of features in common – listening to children's concerns, showing understanding and empathy, and providing support – while consistently challenging unauthorised absence.

Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman said:

Children only get one chance at school – and we know nothing beats being in a classroom, in front of a teacher.

It's so important, after so much disruption for this generation, to make sure every child who can attend school, does attend school.

That's the best way to help children catch up, achieve their potential and enjoy a full and rewarding childhood.

As a result, a number of pledges were made, including:

- Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families will be working with all social work leaders and local authorities that have had particular success driving high attendance rates amongst children with social workers to share their innovation and best practice widely.
- SOLACE and the Association of Directors of Children's Services are to work together to better understand and formalise how the best results can be achieved when multiple organisations need to work together to address persistent and entrenched disengagement from school.
- The Northern Education Trust and Confederation of School Trusts, supported by leaders of special schools and alternative provision, will convene a working group of trust leaders to sit beneath the alliance to identify the best practice in supporting children to attend school regularly.

Chief Social Worker Isabelle Trowler said:

The impact of the pandemic on children's wellbeing has emphasised the crucial importance of school attendance. Social workers play such a pivotal role in supporting families to help get their children back into school and attending every day.

Earlier this week senior social work leaders across England told me about their sterling efforts to make attendance a priority and the ways in which, they do this.

Sharing this best practice is critical. I have heard so many great examples of joint working between schools and children's social care services during the pandemic and look forward to strengthening those relationships through the work of the attendance alliance.

SOLACE Children and Families spokesperson Ade Adetosoye OBE said:

We welcome this alliance as we need to do all we can to ensure that

there is real connectivity between social workers and education professionals and that there is a consistent cohesiveness across the country that supports schools, pupils and parents.

Our early years are our formative years and it is patently clear that when a child does not attend school, that there are reasons for this. Quite often, this non-attendance can act as an early warning alarm bell that all is not right in the life of that child.

It is something that the social work and teaching professions need to act on and build on what is already underway. Success here will not just improve the situation for children who no doubt need our help but also for society as a whole.

President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services Charlotte Ramsden said:

Schools play a vital role in keeping children safe; they are not just places where children develop academically, but socially and emotionally too.

We fully support the importance of maximizing attendance and understanding and addressing the reasons for persistent absence.

Being out of school places children at greater risk of long-term negative impact, therefore it's crucial that we work together to build an inclusive education system and ensure that pupils are in the classroom when they should be, because every day in school really counts.

Chief Executive of the Confederation of School Trusts Leora Cruddas said:

I am very pleased to be invited to join the alliance and to make a contribution to the important matter of school attendance.

It is essential that we ensure all of our children are back at school. It is the routines and structures of schooling that we enable children to bounce back from the pandemic.

I am delighted to be working with Rob Tarn, chief executive of the Northern Education Trust to convene a working group of trust leaders to consider what might be needed to ensure all children to attend school.

CEO of the Northern Education Trust Rob Tarn said:

As educationalists, we all understand the devastating impact that poor attendance has on student outcomes, not only on their academic

achievements, but also on the development of essential social and emotional skills.

Over many years, I have been fortunate enough to work alongside numerous, talented people developing strategies, that have had a direct impact on improving attendance in even the most challenging of circumstances.

I am honoured and excited to work as part of an alliance with the Secretary of State for Education, Leora Cruddas Chief Executive Officer, Confederation of School Trusts and esteemed colleagues to further develop and share good practice across the sector.

The alliance will meet monthly for the remainder of the academic year, considering the impact of actions they have taken and what more may be required to address the full range of barriers to children's regular school attendance.

National Clinical Advisor on Children's Mental Health for NHS England Professor Peter Fonagy said:

Regular attendance at school is one of the best ways of protecting a child's mental health and wellbeing and laying down the foundations for their long-term success in life.

This is why we must all be very concerned whenever a child's absence from school is protracted, while at the same time recognising that the reasons for their absence may be complex and determined by multiple factors.

I am delighted to be part of this crucial initiative involving all the relevant agencies to ensure that we act in unison supporting children, families and schools to ensure the highest possible levels of school attendance for our children and young people.

President of the Royal College of General Practitioners Professor Dame Clare Gerada said:

I am delighted to be part of this group. As a GP for more than 30 years I am only too aware that what I see in my consulting room, especially mental ill health, have their origins outside and in particular in childhood.

Keeping children in school – allowing them to reach their potential is an important predictor of later good mental health.

CEO of the Eden Academy Trust Susan Douglas said:

I welcome the opportunity to collaborate with others both within and outside of the alliance in order to contribute to the important area of improving school attendance.

2020 proved great things can be achieved when education providers and professionals work together to identify innovation and effective practice. I look forward to bringing the voice of the specialist sector into these discussions, a sector which has seen particular challenges and issues during this recent period.

Chief Executive of the NSPCC Sir Peter Wanless said:

School plays a crucial role in supporting children's wellbeing and keeping them safe, but during the pandemic the number of pupils not attending school regularly has increased.

The attendance alliance will help address barriers to attendance and I look forward to engaging with others in the sector to highlight why having children in school regularly is such a top priority.

National Police Chiefs' Council lead for Local Policing, Chief Constable Olivia Pinkney said:

We are pleased to be included within the alliance on this important issue.

Police will be playing their part, along with other leaders across society to ensure that children receive vital support and have access to education.

The NPCC will have a standing representative within this alliance, to ensure we are always able to offer our operational expertise and support wherever appropriate.

General Secretary of the National Association of Headteachers Paul Whiteman said:

Schools work tirelessly to encourage good attendance and there is a range of excellent practice up and down the country.

School leaders know the importance of good attendance and that is why they work so hard to support pupils and families, particularly those where persistent absence becomes an issue.

We know that attendance has dropped during the pandemic. Obviously, a large proportion of this is due to Covid itself, but there appear to be other factors at play too.

It is important that as an alliance we understand those factors so that the right support mechanisms can be put in place. This important work will require a joined-up approach where schools are supported by the appropriate external agencies and partners.

Director of Policy at the Association of School and College Leaders Julie McCulloch said:

Persistent absence among some young people was a problem before the pandemic and may have become worse amidst the disruption to the routines of school life and anxiety caused by the virus.

It is of vital importance that we work collectively to identify practical measures which encourage and support young people to be where they need to be – learning in the classroom.