

Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: A report on progress 2016-2021

Summary Report

March 2021



Summary of key Messages

- There is a strong body of evidence that shows good progress is being made towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap and that the SAC, supported by the £750 million ASF, is having a positive impact.
- Almost nine out of ten schools reported that they have seen an improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment and/or health and wellbeing as a result of ASF supported approaches.
- A great majority of headteachers (96%) felt that they had a good awareness of the range of approaches that can help close the poverty-related attainment gap, while 93% felt confident about selecting the approach most effective for their school.
- Over the first five years of the SAC programme there is evidence that almost all of the short and medium-term outcomes have been overtaken and there has been demonstrable progress on a number of long-term measures to close the poverty related attainment gap.
- The attainment gap is closing, but it remains a long-term endeavour.
- For primary school pupils, the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy has narrowed. (based on the combined P1,P4&P7 attainment since 2016/17)
- For S3 pupils, the attainment gap in numeracy narrowed between 2016/17 and 2018/19.
- The gap in the proportion of young people in education, employment and training has narrowed year-on-year between 2017 (11.5pp) and 2020 (9.9pp).
- The most recent evidence from the International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) acknowledged the progress that is being made in Scottish education to close the attainment gap through the SAC and wider education policies.
- Whilst the attainment data indicates a variation in the pace of progress, the change in culture and ethos that is being seen, particularly in Challenge Authorities, with a stronger focus on poverty and equity, will maximise the sustainability of those improvements already achieved, providing solid foundations on which we can accelerate progress.

1. Introduction

The shared vision for Scottish education is to deliver excellence and equity for all, with the defining mission of closing the poverty-related attainment gap, ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed.

This is a long-term commitment that has been supported by a system wide, collaborative endeavour between all partners within Scottish education to make Scotland the best place to grow and learn.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) was launched by the First Minister in 2015 to bring more urgency and focus to the issue of the attainment gap which has remained a feature of our society for generations. During the course of this parliamentary term, the Scottish Government has upheld a relentless focus on efforts to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The Scottish Government's commitment to this agenda is demonstrated by the record level of funding that has been invested in education and in the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

[Closing the poverty-related attainment gap – a report on progress 2016-2021](#) assesses the progress that has been made through the Scottish Attainment Challenge and wider education policies towards closing the attainment gap during this Parliamentary term by analysing the wide range of evidence available. This summary report provides an overview of what that evidence tells us about the progress made.

The evidence clearly shows that whilst there is good but variable progress in attainment data, both across the range of attainment measures and across local authorities, significant progress has been made across the education system. This progress is evident in the raised profile of equity in the culture and ethos of the system; improved learning and teaching, underpinned by effective use of data and enquiry; effective collaboration; increased engagement with families and communities; and a focus on health and wellbeing. These are strengths on which the system can build in its ongoing efforts to continue to tackle and reduce further the poverty-related attainment gap.

2. Scotland's foundations for achieving equity in education

Over the last five years, the Scottish Government has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to tackle the attainment gap, through an investment in the Scottish Attainment Challenge and in wider education policies, relentlessly focusing efforts on driving up improvements in education and reducing the impacts of deprivation on educational outcomes.

Scotland's policy framework for education supports the drive to achieve both excellence and equity. The vision and priorities for Scottish education have been agreed across the system, and are presented in the [National Improvement Framework \(NIF\)](#). This framework complements the ongoing implementation of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Getting It Right for

Every Child (GIRFEC), and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW). Combined, these are the supporting pillars of the Scottish education system.

There is system-wide commitment to achieving excellence and equity, a collective ownership of this vision and a joint endeavour to achieve these long-term goals.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge

The SAC has played a central role in delivering equity in Scotland's schools since 2015, helping to close the poverty-related attainment between Scotland's least and most deprived pupils by driving up improvements in **literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing** through targeted approaches and interventions. The approaches, developed by local authorities and schools, have been organised around 3 key drivers:

- **Leadership**
- **Learning and Teaching**
- **Families and Communities**

Each of the 32 local authorities also has direct access to a named **Attainment Advisor (AA)**. The principal role of Attainment Advisors, who are based within Education Scotland, is to ensure a relentless focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. They do this by providing advice and guidance, leading improvement, building capacity and contributing to robust evaluation of impact.

Attainment Scotland Fund

Scottish Attainment Challenge and
£750 million Attainment Scotland Fund 2016-2021



**'Close the
poverty related
attainment gap'**

Since 2015/16 over £750 million has been invested in the SAC through the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The programme, and the funding model, has been developed and extended since its launch to include more children, schools and local authorities. Initially focused on improvement activity in primary schools, the reach of the Challenge is now far wider with targeted activity being delivered across both primary and secondary sectors and beyond. ASF funding now reaches 97% of schools across every local authority area in Scotland as part of a systemic strategy to promote educational equity.

Local delivery of national priorities: what has been delivered

Scotland's CfE lies at the heart of delivering excellence and equity, providing children and young people with a broad range of learning experiences, opportunities and pathways. Schools are encouraged to be adaptable and to tailor their curriculum to meet the needs of every single young person regardless of their background, ensuring they can achieve the aspirations of CfE.

The SAC complements the aims and purpose of CfE, supporting schools and local authorities to provide additional targeted and bespoke support to improve outcomes for children and young people adversely affected by socio-economic disadvantage. Through the Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), headteachers have been empowered to think creatively about the way they use their funding and to tailor approaches to the specific needs of their learners.

Local authorities and schools have been key partners in the delivery of the SAC. The variety of approaches implemented by schools and Challenge Authorities reflects the diverse contexts and circumstances on which they have based their decisions.

A significant proportion of ASF funding has been invested in the recruitment of additional staff. This has not only included additional teachers but also other professionals with specific expertise and skills such as speech and language therapists, counsellors, educational psychologists and family link workers.

Literacy interventions and approaches were the earliest to be implemented through the ASF, particularly in primary schools.

Literacy interventions have included:

- literacy leaders and champions;
- one to one and group support – particularly around early literacy;
- approaches such as reciprocal reading and paired reading;
- new programmes or approaches such as POLAAR (Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource) and a range of commercial resources to support reading, writing, listening and talking; and
- accelerated reader (in secondary schools), active literacy, phonics based programmes, metacognitive work and creative vocabulary development.

Numeracy interventions and approaches were implemented more slowly by some schools and local authorities with some focusing on this priority later in the programme. However, almost 9 out of 10 headteachers now describe numeracy interventions as part of their school's approach to closing the attainment gap.

Numeracy interventions have included:

- numeracy leaders and champions;
- new tools or approaches, including a range of commercial resources to support numeracy;
- learning approaches including cooperative learning strategies, problem solving and linking numeracy to wider STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) activities; and
- one to one numeracy support, small group support, extra maths periods (in secondary schools).

For the majority of schools and local authorities, **health and wellbeing** approaches were an increasingly important part of their approach to closing the attainment gap. Targeted health and wellbeing strategies were developed to support children and young people's readiness to engage in learning. This has become even more important as schools work to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, especially for those who are living with disadvantage, and focus on the recovery phase of education.

Health and wellbeing interventions have included:

- developing a nurture approach (many learning from the model used in Glasgow);
- providing support at key transition stages;
- delivering breakfast and afterschool clubs, homework clubs and supported study;
- providing targeted support for young people including looked after children, children with English as an additional language and refugees;
- counsellors and health and wellbeing assistants integrated within the school;
- outdoor learning, Green Gyms and community gardens;
- approaches using music, dance, sport, physical activity, massage, relaxation, mindfulness and other techniques to provide positive experiences for pupils;
- use of models such as Neurosequential Model in Education, the ICE Pack training resource, growth mindset; and
- in secondary schools, support moving into positive destinations.

3. Strengths of Scotland's approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap

The most recent report (2020) from the [International Council of Education Advisers \(ICEA\)](#) tells us that “*Scottish education exhibits many strengths. It values equity as well as excellence. It has an excellent standing internationally. It is investing effort and resources to narrow attainment gaps, working with and strengthening the teaching profession.*”

There is growing evidence that Scotland's targeted approach is leading to positive progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The Scottish Attainment Challenge has played an important role in driving forward this relentless focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, with many of the short and medium-term outcomes of the programme having been achieved. These provide the foundations for on-going, long-term progress and include:

A widespread and systemic focus on equity

A greater awareness and understanding of the barriers facing children and young people adversely affected by socio-economic disadvantage has emerged. Headteachers understand the needs of their children and families and feel confident about choosing the right approach to closing the attainment gap in their school.

Local authorities have been very important in driving forward a strategic vision for equity at local level. Education Scotland's inspection of the 9 Challenge Authorities identified that the authorities making the greatest progress are building on a very strong and aspirational vision for their children and young people. They have articulated and communicated their vision successfully and achieved strong buy-in from staff at all levels, key partners and stakeholders.

Enhanced learning and teaching and using data for improvement

There is now higher quality learning, teaching and assessment focusing on achieving equity. Evidence shows that outstanding professional learning, informed by high quality data, has resulted in high aspirations, greater understanding of pedagogy and improved leadership of learning in the teacher, schools and authorities making greatest progress.

For example, the impact of professional learning in one of the Challenge Authorities has been found to be outstanding, with a wide range of sector-leading interventions impacting positively on families and communities. These outcomes were based on sound evidence-informed strategies which empower staff, along with strong self-evaluation which challenges staff to continue to improve. The approach taken to professional learning places a strong emphasis on building practitioner capacity and creating an empowered system.

Collaborative working

Another strength has been the increased collaboration at local authority and at school level to support equity. This has included collaboration across schools and local authorities as well as between education and other community partners including parents, to improve the outcomes of children and young people affected by poverty.

In one Challenge Authority, community learning and development is a highly-effective partner for schools, working to improve the life chances of children and young people and their families. Community learning and development-led learning sessions are delivered to families in primary schools and direct support is currently being provided for over 150 young people in secondary schools. A range of courses, including those focused on personal development, have supported a number of parents to successfully move onto college, university and employment.

Amongst the most impactful collaborations were those where partnerships with universities were helping strengthen teachers skills and pedagogy, building capacity in the leadership and supporting evaluation of impact.

The challenges of COVID-19 has led to a strengthening of existing collaborations and the creation of new partnerships. Collaborative working has led to improved outcomes for children, young people and their families by addressing very practical poverty-related barriers.

Working with families and communities

There is increasing evidence of schools working with families and communities to improve the outcomes of children and young people. Schools are more consistently and effectively supporting families with a range of issues that seek to mitigate the impact of poverty on family life and learning.

For example, the employment of family workers, funded through the ASF, has been identified by some schools as key in developing increased engagement of parents and carers with children's and young people's learning. The addition of this role within one school team allowed them to strengthen relationships with all families and directly support families to build their own capacity to understand their child's needs, communicate in a confident way and positively change the dynamics of relationships within their homes.

A further example is in a Challenge Authority where there is a wide range of very well-planned and targeted interventions to engage parents and then to develop how families learn and become active members of the community. Many of the interventions result in accreditation for parents and an increasing number are leading to employment, sometimes for the first time. This is building confidence in individuals and supporting families to have a better future and there is strong evidence that parents are becoming increasingly engaged in supporting their children's learning, in learning themselves and in becoming more active in the community.

Across the majority of local authorities there is a range of holiday activity and food programmes, with local authorities seeing families having improved access to food, clothing and benefits as a result of collaborative policies and plans.

Focus on health and wellbeing

A focus on approaches to support children and young people's readiness to learn through targeted health and wellbeing approaches has been another important feature of the system. Many teachers have reported that good health and wellbeing was critical in that it provided the foundation for learning and improved attainment. This included addressing social and emotional needs, to ensure that children were able to attend school, enjoy school and be ready to learn. This has become an increasingly important focus of many SAC plans, particularly as schools work to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 and focus on the recovery phase of education.

In one local authority, a partnership approach with Barnado's has achieved positive emotional and mental health outcomes for parents, children and young people. 211 children and young people have or are presently participating in 1 to 1 interventions with Family Support Workers who address mental health and wellbeing. 93% of families engaging or who have engaged in a bespoke package of support this year are showing improved mental health and wellbeing. 95% of families across the year have benefited from brief financial interventions such as vouchers for family activities, cinema, food share, food bank, funding grants, clothing vouchers etc.

The successes identified above have helped to achieve the short and medium-term outcomes of the SAC and put in place strong foundations to help us achieve our long-term ambition of closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

4. Progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap

There is a strong body of evidence that shows good progress is being made towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap and that the SAC, supported by the £750 million ASF, is having a positive impact.

The attainment data shows a variation in pace of progress across different local authorities and different measures. However the change in culture and ethos; improved learning and teaching; strengthened collaboration; work with families and communities and the focus on health and wellbeing that is being seen, with a stronger focus on poverty and equity, will maximise the sustainability of those improvements already achieved. Where the level of progress has been more varied, this has often been a result of the attainment of those from the most deprived areas increasing but not at the same rate as those in the least deprived areas.

Internationally, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 indicated that in Scotland the background of students had less of an influence on attainment than the OECD average and less of an influence than it did in Scotland in 2009. Additionally, the ICEA acknowledged the progress that is being made in Scottish education to close the attainment gap through the SAC and wider education policies.

Almost nine out of ten schools reported to have seen an improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment and/or health and wellbeing as a result of ASF supported approaches, with a similar proportion of schools (88%) expecting to see

improvements in the next five years as a result of the approaches being delivered. The autonomy and flexibility provided by PEF has empowered schools to deliver bespoke and creative approaches for learning, tailored to the specific needs of the learners.

Challenge Authorities have benefitted from being part of SAC since the beginning of the programme. Whilst evidence shows a variation in the rate of progress towards closing the attainment gap between the Challenge Authorities, it also demonstrates that, collectively they have made greater progress towards achieving the medium-term outcomes of the programme as a result of this longer-term investment.

Over the first five years of the SAC programme there is evidence that almost all of the short and medium-term outcomes have been overtaken. More time and further development of the programme is now needed to ensure the long-term aspirations are achieved.

5. Impact of COVID-19 on outcomes for learners

It is undisputed that the impact of COVID-19, and the period of school building closures, is likely to have made education inequality worse and more complex to tackle. These are impacts that are being experienced simultaneously in countries across the world. As highlighted by the International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA), (2020), “The pandemic reinforces the issue of equity as the defining agenda of our time.”

Cognisant of this, our [Equity Audit](#) (published in January 2021) helps to deepen our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to outline the actions already taken to meet this challenge, and to set clear areas of focus for accelerating recovery.

The findings of this audit reiterate the importance of an ongoing, long-term and system-wide focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. They also highlight the scale and potential depth of the impacts of the pandemic, and recognise that the full extent of those may not become fully visible for some time.

This disruption to the system and to the lives of Scotland’s children and young people reinforces the continued need to focus on equity and excellence, with the Equity Audit highlighting the need for a continued focus on health and wellbeing.

6. Next steps

Building on the strengths of the SAC

The evolution of the Challenge and its associated investment saw the number of Challenge Authorities rise from seven to nine, whilst the schools programme and universal offer evolved, and support for care experienced children and young people and PEF were introduced. This gradual development saw the programme grow from a very targeted approach to closing the attainment gap to a system-wide improvement strategy to promote educational equity.

In looking ahead to continued efforts to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap, it is clear that there is progress to build on by focusing on the key areas of strength identified in the report. These include culture and ethos; strengthened learning and teaching and leadership, underpinned by effective use of data and enquiry; effective collaboration and supporting networks; close engagement with families and communities; a focus on health and wellbeing; and the support and challenge provided by Attainment Advisors.

Holistic and integrated approach

The holistic approach of SAC has been a factor in embedding the culture and ethos of equity in the system, engendering a collective ownership of change. Supported by PEF, efforts to empower the system to make decisions closer to the classroom have created the conditions for decision-making more tailored to the needs of specific groups, families, children or young people. This has been generally welcomed by headteachers, highlighting the benefits of this system-wide approach to achieving equity in education.

There is evidence, however, that this autonomy has been particularly valued alongside co-ordinated local authority-wide approaches, highlighting the benefits of a blend of both school-led and strategic local authority-led approaches to achieving equity in education.

A strength of the programme from the outset has been the commitment not to reduce the SAC to a narrow focus on attainment, whereby success is only measured against a narrow set of measures such as test scores. Rather the SAC has taken a broader, more holistic and integrated approach that has included a range of approaches to promote health and wellbeing and recognise wider achievement. This has seen LAs and schools implement a wide range of approaches that include activities such as the daily mile and a range of nurture programmes. In line with the aims of the CfE, that recognition of wider achievement on top of attainment is a strength to take forward in supporting children and young people to achieve their full potential.

The experiences of the pandemic have brought the importance of continuing and improving this holistic and integrated approach to tackling the poverty related attainment gap into sharper focus than ever. The nature of this holistic and integrated approach needs to be strategic, adaptive to emerging need, and accurately targeted to support those who need it most, whilst maintaining its long term vision of equity and excellence.

Targeting to accelerate recovery and progress

We have also learned that the intensity of approaches and levels of investment required to sustain improvements in settings with the highest concentrations of deprivation can be quite different to those required in other settings with lower levels of deprivation or with different challenges and barriers to learning.

Therefore, alongside considering the most impactful blend of authority-led strategic approaches and school-led local approaches, we can consider also more finely grained approaches focusing on school clusters or neighbourhoods within local authorities. An approach that relies on local knowledge of deprivation and its associated issues within specific local communities could allow for precise, targeted and co-ordinated interventions within Scotland's holistic and integrated approach, looking to support the collective impact of service provision across phases and sectors.

A renewed focus and continued commitment

COVID-19 and the impact of school building closures has had a detrimental impact on the progress being made. This disruption to the system and to the lives of Scotland's children and young people reinforces the continued need to focus on equity and excellence, with the Equity Audit highlighting the need for a continued focus on health and wellbeing. A range of action is already underway in response to COVID-19 to support education recovery and help close the poverty-related attainment gap via the recruitment of additional teachers, provision of digital devices and connectivity, targeted youth work programmes, wider provision of free school meals and increased support for families to engage with learning at home.

In addition to these, in 2021/22 the Scottish Government has increased its investment in the SAC to over £200 million by introducing a one-year £20 million PEF Covid-19 Premium. This increases the investment in PEF from almost £128 million to almost £148 million and builds on the £750 million invested over the course of this Parliament and over £375 million in education recovery to date. This action will ensure headteachers across 97% of schools will have further additional funding to support the children and young people who need it most.

The work to close the poverty-related attainment gap remains a long-term goal. To deliver this, a renewed focus is required. This report demonstrates that whilst the attainment data indicates variation in the pace of progress across the country, good progress has been made in a number of foundational strengths that the system can build on. The opportunity ahead is to build on these foundations and accelerate.

This must remain a collective, system-wide endeavour that builds on the progress to date and one where the voices of children and young people are key to its continued development.

As children's rights become embedded in all aspects of society, there is increasing urgency and scope for the voices of our children and young people to influence the interventions that will improve their life chances.

The voices of children and young people are evident in a range of local approaches to tackling the poverty related attainment gap, for example where one local authority

implemented the Social Justice Ambassadors Programme, which used the voice of young people to tackle poverty-related challenges in schools. The children and young people involved gave their views on a range of motions regarding community issues in their areas to lead staff from across the LA including Elected Members, third sector and Community Partnerships feeding into collaboration between young people and school staff to identify approaches to investing PEF.

We want to build on this. A children's rights approach has been embedded into the Scottish Government's response to COVID-19 and its approach to recovery and renewal and will be embedded in its continued efforts to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

In addition, the Government is convening an Advisory Group which includes some of the best minds in the system and will include education leaders and practitioners, third sector organisations and education and social justice experts to support the development of approaches to continue and build on progress beyond 2021/22.

Input from both the Advisory Group and children and young people, alongside the evidence in this report, the Equity Audit and consultation with a range of partners and stakeholders, including the ICEA, will be key to refining our approach going forward.

This refined approach developed in consultation with system experts, leaders, partners and children and young people will build on the strong foundations identified in this report and take forward a whole-system approach whilst further targeting approaches to accelerate recovery and progress and ensure all children and young people, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to succeed.



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