



Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation - Headteacher Survey: 2021 Report



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Headteacher Survey 2021 Research Report

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Executive Summary

This report presents key findings from the sixth survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) support, covering the 2020/21 academic year including the period of school building closures from January to March 2021.

Of headteachers who responded to the survey:

A large majority (87%) have seen improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap - and 94% expect further improvement over the next few years (a 6-point improvement on the 2020 survey).

More than half (54%) expect their progress to be sustainable, and 65% felt that the focus on equity would be sustainable (up 17 points on 2019).

The great majority (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had impacted their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Headteachers were most likely to have seen progress in closing the gap where they had tailored approaches to local needs, where the culture/ethos had changed, where use of data was strong, and where engagement with families/communities was part of the approach.

Headteachers have seen a range of new circumstances affecting families since school building closures, most commonly an increase in mental health and wellbeing needs, (78% reported this) and difficulty accessing services due to COVID-19 (65%).

Most schools (83%) changed their approach to equity from the previous school year, including a greater focus on mental health, more support for remote learning, and additional staffing skills and capacity.

The great majority of headteachers felt they had autonomy to plan for their school's needs (93%), and that PEF provided additional resource (89%).

Schools saw a lack of in-person contact as a key challenge associated with COVID-19 and school building closures. Staffing capacity/absences and supporting pupils/families (including in response to increasing support needs) were also key challenges for schools – with responses showing a significant increase in references to challenges around staffing capacity.

Wellbeing-focused approaches and tools have been a key element of the response to challenges for many schools. Schools have also been able to adapt teaching and learning approaches in light of their experience of the previous school year. Engagement with pupils and families has also been key to schools' response – maintaining communication to better understand needs, schools acting as a key source of support and signposting to other services, and ensuring a shared ethos and commitment to equity.

The survey was issued to all schools in receipt of Challenge Authority (CA), Schools Programme (SP), and Pupil Equity Funding (PEF). A total of 597 survey responses were received, a 25% response rate. This is similar to the 2020 survey, although the larger survey sample used this year means that the volume of responses is nearly 50% higher than in 2020. Survey data has been weighted to minimise the impact of any response bias.

Findings, based on headteachers who responded to the survey, are summarised below in relation to the main survey themes.

ASF and supported approaches

A great majority of respondents (96%) felt they understood the challenges faced by pupils affected by poverty, and a large majority (81%) felt that the approach to achieving equity was embedded within their school. Both findings are similar to 2020 and 2019 surveys.

Headteachers have seen a range of new circumstances affecting families since school building closures. The most common were increasing mental health and wellbeing needs (78% felt this had become much more common) and difficulty accessing services due to COVID-19 (65%). In response, a large majority of respondents have used ASF to support a greater focus on mental health, more support for remote learning and digital connectivity, and additional staffing skills and capacity.

A large majority (83%) had changed their approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, similar to the 2020 survey but a 16-point increase since 2019. Most (73%) also made use of additional flexibility in use of ASF introduced in response to the pandemic, most commonly to secure additional staffing capacity, digital resources, and support those affected by poverty. Most (77%) have also drawn on their previous experience of the COVID-19 pandemic to inform changes during 2020/21.

Many survey respondents have found aspects of the 2020/21 school year more challenging than 2019/20. Engaging and supporting families, delivering remote learning, responding to increased mental health needs, and maintaining pupil engagement were the areas most commonly found more challenging. Some also highlighted aspects of 2020/21 which had been less challenging, including improved digital skills and refining the approach to remote learning and managing the return to school.

A large majority of survey respondents (82%) had engaged with families and communities as part of their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, similar to the 2020 survey. These respondents were also asked to describe how their approach to engagement had developed during 2020/21. This was most commonly through ongoing communication with families (such as regular 'check in'), improved understanding of families' circumstances and needs, more use of digital resources/platforms, and more tailored engagement including use of multiple communication platforms and approaches, social events/activities, and engagement specifically focused on vulnerable pupils and families.

Use of data and evaluation

A large majority of survey respondents were positive about their use of data and evidence in developing approaches (87%), measuring impact (81%) and measuring progress (79%). Most (61%) also felt that ASF support has helped to develop staff skills and knowledge in using data and evaluation. These findings are very similar to the 2020 survey, although ratings of use of evidence to measure impact are below the 2019 survey.

Impact

A large majority (87%) of survey respondents have seen improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap as a result of ASF-supported approaches, similar to previous surveys. A larger number (94%) expected to see further improvement in closing the gap over the next few years, a 6-point increase on 2020, although this followed a 10-point fall from 2019. Headteachers were significantly more likely to expect further improvement in closing the gap if they had already seen 'a lot' of improvement to date.

The great majority (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, with more than half having seen a 'significant impact'. This is very similar to the 2020 survey. Findings also suggest that those with lower PEF allocations, in rural areas and PEF-only schools were most likely to feel that their progress had been affected.

Analysis indicates that headteachers are most likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap where they had been able to tailor use of ASF to local needs, where there had been a change of culture or ethos, where there was effective use of evidence, and where engaging families and communities is part of the approach to achieving equity. This range of factors is broadly similar to previous surveys, although tailoring use of ASF to local needs and use of evidence were newly identified as significant factors this year.

More than half (54%) of survey respondents felt that progress to date in closing the poverty-related attainment gap would be sustainable, a 21-point increase on the 2019 survey. In addition, nearly two thirds (65%) expected the focus on equity to be sustainable, a 17-point increase on 2019. Those who expected progress to be sustainable pointed to development of staff skills and capacity as being sustainable, even if the approaches themselves cannot continue in their current form.

Nearly two thirds (62%) had seen an increase in collaborative working as a result of ASF support. This is consistent with the 2020 survey but 15 points below the 2017 survey. Increased collaboration was most commonly with families/communities and schools in the same local authority. Some also reported new collaborations having emerged, most commonly with third sector and public sector agencies.

Pupil Equity Funding

The great majority (93%) of survey respondents felt they had the autonomy to develop PEF plans that responded to their local context – similar to the 2020 survey, but 12 points higher than 2017. Views were also highly positive on whether PEF had provided additional resource to address the poverty-related attainment gap (89%, similar to 2020), and on whether PEF had been used effectively to meet local needs (93%).

Most respondents in receipt of PEF alongside CA or SP support (80% of this group) had used at least some of their PEF allocation to support approaches that were distinct from CA/SP approaches. The great majority (94%) of this group also reported seeing improvement the poverty-related gap specifically as a result of their PEF funding – compared with 87% of all respondents who had seen improvement as a result of ASF support.

Learning from COVID-19

Headteachers were asked separately about the challenges they had faced during 2020/21 as a result of COVID-19, and their response to these.

In terms of challenges facing schools in 2020/21, a lack of face-to-face pupil contact was the most commonly cited. This was typically raised in relation to school building closures, but some referred to increased pupil absence continuing to limit in-person contact when school buildings were open, and saw this as an issue for vulnerable pupils and families in particular. Reduced staffing capacity through COVID-19 related absence and difficulties securing cover were also highlighted as significant issues – and more commonly so than in 2020. Supporting pupils and families was also a challenge for some respondents. This included support for remote learning, managing the return to school following the period of building closures, rebuilding pupil resilience lost during building closures, and responding to a perceived increase in mental health needs (with schools playing an important role while access to specialist services was limited).

Respondents highlighted varying aspects of their response to these challenges. Wellbeing-focused approaches, adaption of teaching and learning approaches, and communication with families/communities were the most commonly cited. This included examples of schools drawing on their experience of the pandemic in 2019/20 to refine these aspects of their approach to achieving equity. Schools also referred to having dedicated considerable resources to support wellbeing across the school community. The role of engagement with pupils and families for the focus on wellbeing was also noted by some. For example, ongoing regular communication with families has been crucial for schools improving their understanding of local needs, and has been a means of identifying and responding to the need for wellbeing support. Communication with pupils/families has also been key to schools' work to recover deterioration in resilience across the school community, and to restore their shared ethos.

Cross-cutting themes

Several themes emerged across survey findings which appear to have an important bearing on schools' work to close the poverty-related attainment gap. For example, respondents most likely to report improvement:

- had tailored use of ASF based on their understanding of local needs;
- had embedded approaches to equity across the school;
- felt their use of data and evidence was strong; and
- had engaged effectively with families and communities as part of their wider approach to achieving equity.

Several wider themes were also evident, which had emerged in the specific context of ongoing challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how schools have responded to these:

- **Supporting pupil and family wellbeing** has been especially important in response to increasing numbers of pupils and families with mental health and wellbeing needs. The importance of pupil and family wellbeing is also reflected in responses highlighting wellbeing as a potential barrier to recovery from the impacts of the pandemic, with some indicating that an initial focus on supporting wellbeing had been necessary to enable pupils to fully re-engage with their learning.
- **Refining approaches to equity in light of experience of the pandemic** has been evident in the number of schools drawing on their experience of the first year of the pandemic, and in particular the first period of school building closures. This experience has been used most obviously in schools continuing to develop their remote learning approaches and resources, but has also helped schools in adapting approaches to support pupils' return to school, and further development of staff skills and capacity.
- **Better understanding of the challenges affecting pupils and families** has continued to develop through **closer relationships with families and the community**. This has been reflected in the number of schools reporting a focus on continuing pupil and family engagement, as a means of the wider focus on pupil and family wellbeing. In response to an improved understanding of pupil and family needs, some schools have worked to rebuild resilience across the school community.
- **Ensuring a shared ethos and values across the school community** continues to be a key focus for schools as part of their work to recover from the impact of the pandemic. Some reported a deterioration in the sense of community during school building closures, and have worked to rebuilt their shared ethos through effective communication and engagement with pupils and families.

While these themes were highlighted in the unique context of COVID-19, responses indicate that they will continue to inform work to achieve equity.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report presents findings from the 2021 survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of support from the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The survey was commissioned by Scottish Government's Learning Analysis Unit to inform the wider evaluation of ASF.
- 1.2. This section provides an overview of the background to the survey, and summarises the methodology and fieldwork. Further detail on the survey methodology – together with full tabular results and a copy of the survey questionnaire - is provided in the associated Technical Report at <https://www.gov.scot/isbn/9781804355510>.

Background

- 1.3. Launched in 2015, the Scottish Attainment Challenge's (SAC) mission is to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty. This includes a focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities. The SAC has developed and expanded since 2015, and currently incorporates the following main strands:
 - **Pupil Equity Funding (PEF)** provides funds directly to schools for headteachers to use at their discretion on initiatives that they consider will help close the poverty related attainment gap. Over 97% of schools in Scotland have been allocated funding, based on the estimated numbers of pupils in Primary 1 to S3 registered for free school meals.
 - **The Challenge Authority (CA) and Schools Programmes (SP) funds** provide additional resource to nine local authorities, and 73 schools outwith those local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation. Each Challenge Authority/Schools Programme school receives funding and support to deliver improvement plans focused on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing to tackle the poverty related attainment gap.
- 1.4. Evidence collated over the first 5 years of the SAC provides an opportunity to refresh the programme, and address the challenges identified through feedback and engagement with stakeholders. Supported by £1 billion over the parliamentary term, from 2022/23 the SAC will be refreshed with a focus on enabling authorities and schools to support education recovery, reduce variation and accelerate progress in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. This will include:
 - a broader recognition of children and young people's achievements and attainment;

- continued empowerment of school leaders through PEF;
 - a clearer and funded strategic role for all local authorities;
 - funding for PEF and local authorities confirmed over 4 years to enable long term planning;
 - continued support for care experienced children and young people; and
 - a clear framework to support recovery and accelerate progress, led by Education Scotland but with clear responsibilities for all parts of the education system to ensure a clearer line of sight right through the system on the impact of local approaches.
- 1.5. The current SAC programme is evaluated through the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) evaluation. As the ASF evaluation has evolved, the focus of the evidence being collected through the Headteacher Survey has moved towards a greater focus on progress and impact of approaches being delivered. This evidence is helping to inform the evaluation, which in turn has shaped the SAC refresh.¹

Study objectives and methodology

- 1.6. This is the sixth survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of ASF support. Surveys in 2016 and 2017 included headteachers across the Challenge Authorities and Schools Programmes, with PEF-only schools included for the first time in the 2018 survey. The survey sample was reduced for the 2020 survey (to include all CA and SP schools, and 50% of PEF-only schools) in recognition of the pressures on schools as a result of school building closures in force at the time. The present survey reinstated a 100% sample approach, with the survey issued to all schools in receipt of Challenge Authority, Schools Programme and/or Pupil Equity Funding. As a result, the survey sample for the present survey was around 50% larger than the 2020 survey sample.

¹ The ASF evaluation is underpinned by the SAC Programme Logic Model, a diagrammatic planning tool that shows how the programme produces change. The SAC Logic Model has been adapted to incorporate the refreshed SAC and its mission, which encompasses child poverty, broader achievement and an increased focus on health and wellbeing and family and community support.

- 1.7. The survey sought headteacher views and experiences relating to the 2020/21 academic year. Survey content was adapted from that used in the 2020 survey. Key indicators were maintained where survey findings are used to track trends over time, alongside changes to some survey questions to reflect changes in the context to the survey, in terms of the level of government restrictions resulting from COVID-19 in force during the 2020/21 school year. Survey design kept a tight focus on key questions which could inform the ongoing ASF evaluation, to limit survey completion time and the associated burden on schools.
- 1.8. The profile of schools across the three ASF streams and urban/rural geography² is summarised below.

Table 1: Survey population by ASF funding stream

Urban/Rural area	Challenge Authority	Schools Programme	PEF-only	All
Urban area	485	48	672	1205 (50%)
Small town	47	8	201	256 (11%)
Rural area	61	8	674	743 (31%)
Unknown	63	9	115	187 (8%)
Total	656 (27%)	73 (3%)	1662 (70%)	2,391

- 1.9. Consistent with previous surveys, survey invites were issued directly to schools, supported by promotion via Education Scotland and local authorities. The survey was issued in October 2021 and the fieldwork period ran to mid-November 2021. The survey response and approach to survey weighting is summarised over the following pages.

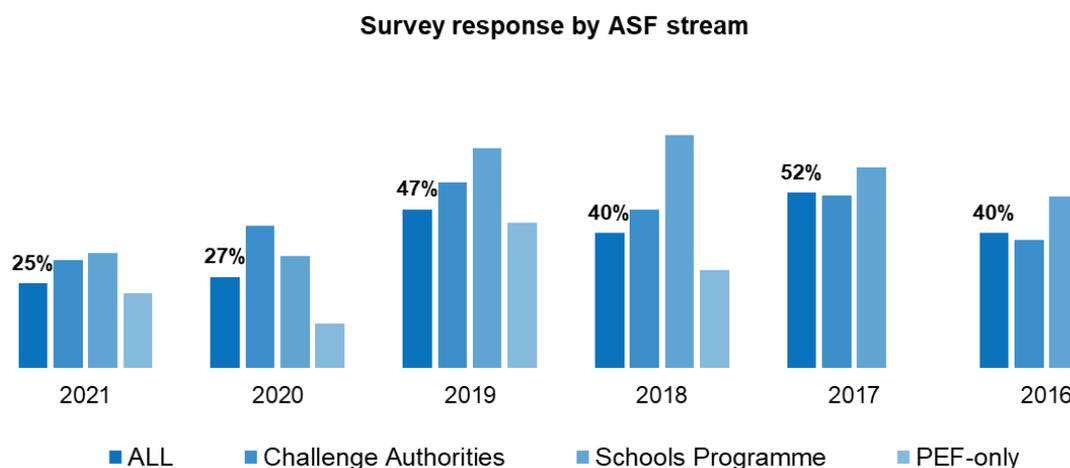
Survey response

- 1.10. A total of 597 responses were received by survey close, equivalent to an overall response rate of 25%. The level of survey response is similar to the 27% achieved by the 2020 survey, but remains substantially lower than response to the 2019 survey (47%). This is likely to reflect in part the continuing pressures on schools associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; the present survey was conducted in October and November 2021 with high COVID-19 case rates across Scotland.

² Urban/rural classification of schools was adapted from the 6-fold classification published by the Scottish Government, based on the location of the school building.

1.11. In this context, we very much appreciate those schools able to participate. Moreover, the increased sample size used for the present survey means that the volume of responses is nearly 50% higher than the 2020 survey.

Figure 1: Survey response by funding stream - 2016 to 2021



1.12. Table 2 summarises the profile of survey respondents, and compares this with all schools in receipt of ASF support. In terms of the profile of respondents, the largest groups are PEF-only schools, primary schools, and schools in urban areas. This differs somewhat from the profile of all ASF-supported schools on a number of indicators (as noted later in this section, survey weighting has been used to correct for representation of ASF streams and urban/rural geography):

- PEF-only schools are over-represented and Challenge Authority schools under-represented due to a lower response rate for Challenge Authority schools.
- Schools with lower PEF allocations are under-represented, and those with higher allocations are over-represented.
- Schools in rural areas are under-represented, and schools in urban areas over-represented. Again, survey weighting has been used to correct for this.

Table 2: Profile of survey respondents by funding stream

	Respondents (n=597)	All schools in receipt of ASF	Differential
Attainment Scotland Fund			
Challenge Authorities	34%	27%	7%
Schools' Programme	5%	3%	1%
PEF-only	61%	69%	-8%
PEF allocation³			
Lower	21%	27%	-5%
Middle	44%	49%	-4%
Higher	35%	25%	10%
School sector			
Primary schools	84%	81%	3%
Secondary schools	12%	15%	-3%
Special schools	4%	5%	-1%
Urban/rural location			
Urban	61%	55%	6%
Small town	11%	12%	-1%
Rural	28%	34%	-6%

Analysis and reporting

1.13. Survey responses have been weighted by ASF stream and urban/rural location to adjust for response bias⁴; all results presented in the remainder of this report are weighted. Base numbers for each survey question vary due to question non-response – i.e. the results exclude non-respondents to the question unless stated otherwise.

³ 'Lower', 'middle' and 'higher' ranges of PEF allocation are based, respectively, on the lower 25% of schools, middle 50% of schools, and upper 25% of schools in terms of PEF allocation in 2018/19.

⁴ Survey weighting is used to re-balance survey responses to bring them more in line with the known profile of the wider population. In this instance, and consistent with previous surveys, weights were calculated to ensure response data was more consistent with the profile of all schools in receipt of ASF support, in terms of their distribution across ASF streams and urban/rural geography.

- 1.14. The volume of survey responses permitted more detailed analysis across key respondent groups. Survey analysis has used hypothesis tests with a 5% significance level to identify significant differences across these groups, and from previous survey findings.⁵ These included:
- ASF stream;
 - PEF allocation;
 - School sector; and
 - Urban/rural location.
- 1.15. Where variation across these groups is noted in the body of the survey report, this is based on a statistically significant difference between groups.
- 1.16. Survey data showed some inconsistency between responses and data on ASF support provided to schools, for example, 20 Challenge Authority respondents indicated that their school received only Pupil Equity Funding. Consistent with previous surveys, the categorisation of respondents used in our analysis has been based on Scottish Government records rather than self-reporting.
- 1.17. The survey included a number of questions giving headteachers the opportunity to respond in their own words. This feedback has been coded into broad themes, and the results presented in the survey report. This includes the percentage of respondents coded into each theme – note that these percentages are based on those answering the question, and respondents can be assigned to multiple themes. Presentation of written feedback also includes direct quotes - this material has been edited for brevity and to ensure anonymity.

⁵ Hypothesis testing is used to assess whether the difference between two survey results (such as between the current and previous survey, or between two respondent groups) is significant. Using a 5% significance level, where a difference between two results is identified as significant, this means that we can be 95% confident that the difference exists in the wider population (i.e. all schools in receipt of ASF support). We also refer to 'a substantial proportion' in the body of the report – while this does not have a specific statistical meaning, we use the term to refer to a relatively large minority of respondents.

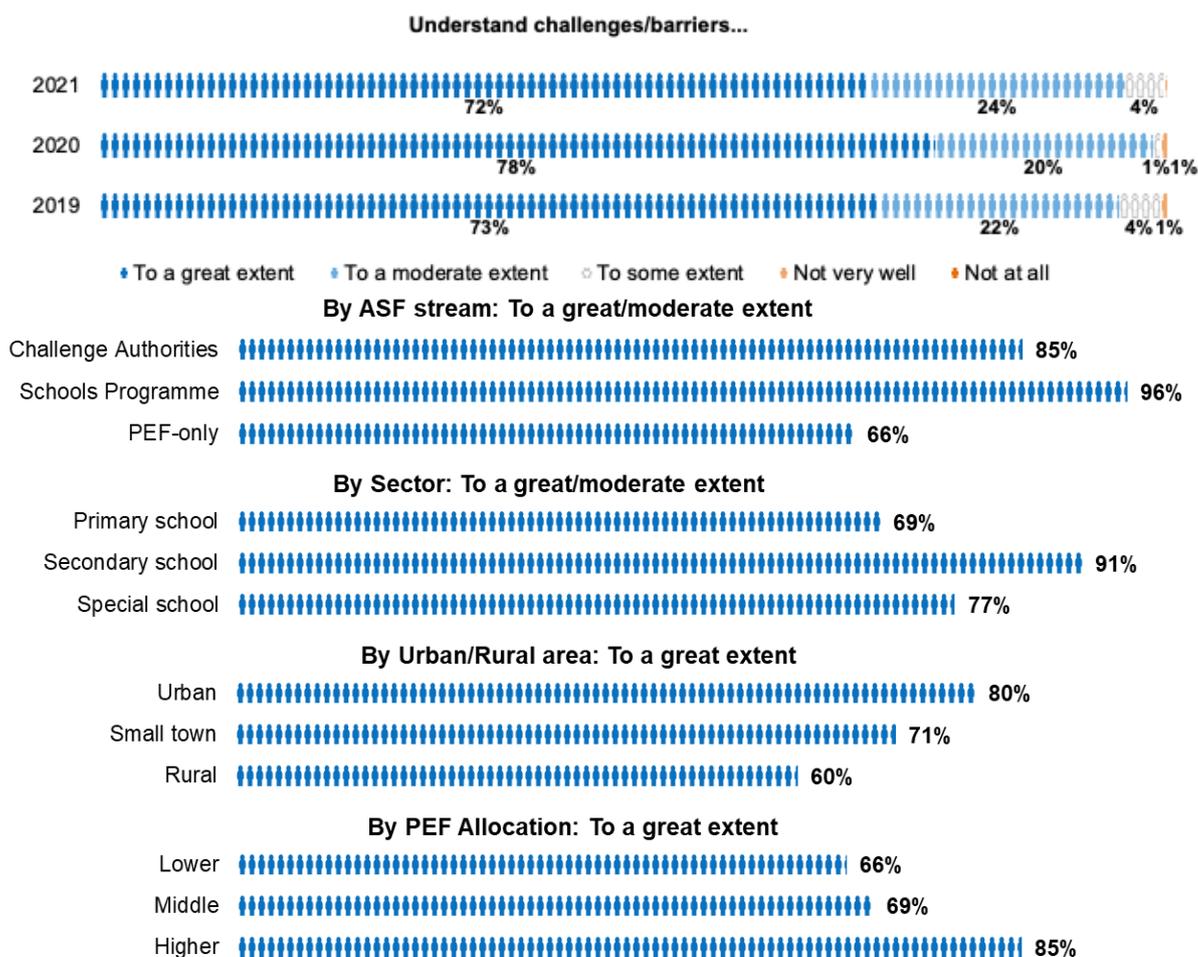
2. ASF and supported approaches

2.1. This section summarises survey findings on respondents' experiences in developing their approach, including schools' response to changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and engagement with families and communities.

Developing the approach

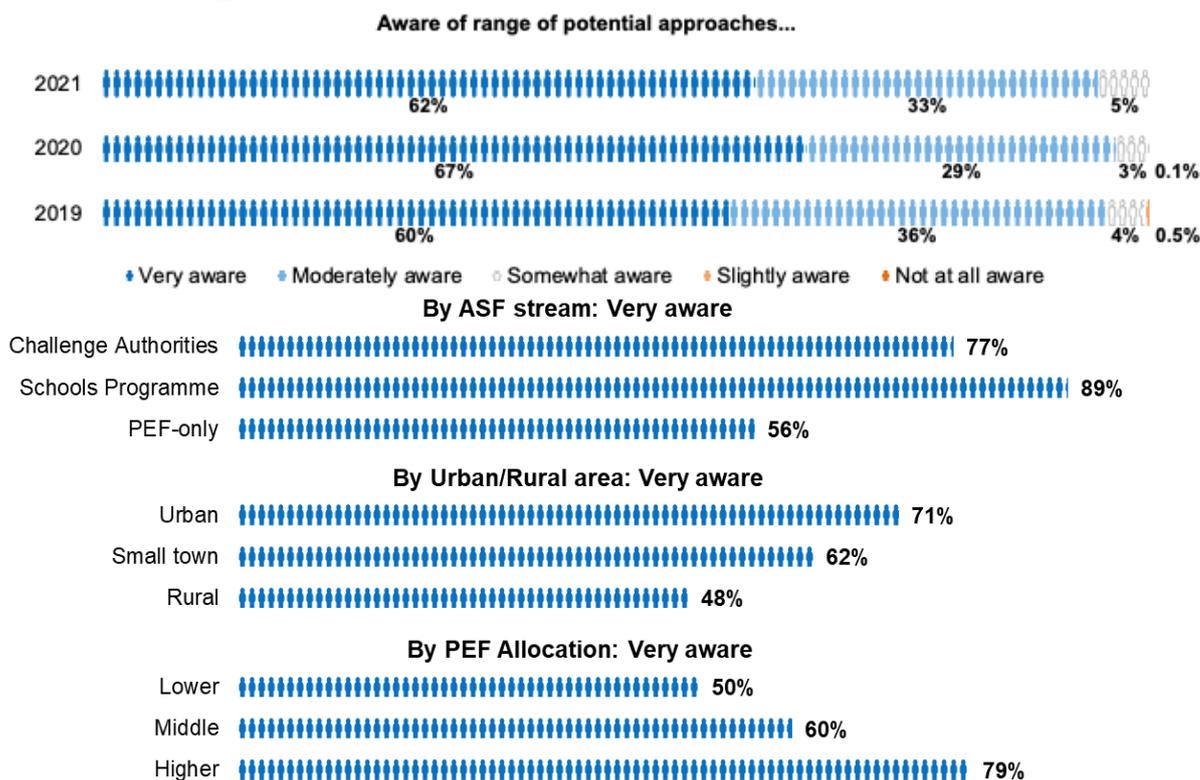
2.2. A great majority of survey respondents felt they understood the challenges and barriers faced by pupils affected by poverty; 96%, including 72% who felt they understood this 'to a great extent'. This is broadly similar to the 2020 and 2019 surveys, but survey results show some variation across key respondent groups; in particular, PEF-only schools, primary schools, those in rural areas, and those with lower PEF allocations were less likely to feel that they understood these challenges.

Figure 2: Understanding of challenges/barriers faced by pupils affected by poverty in your school



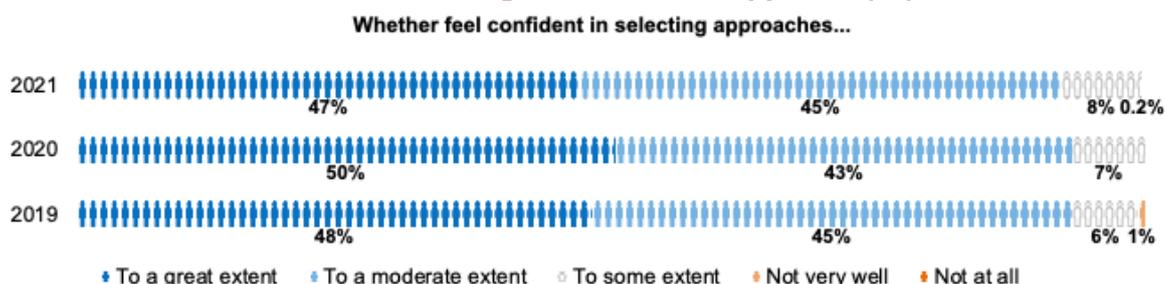
2.3. A large majority of headteachers felt they are aware of the range of potential approaches available to their school in closing the poverty-related attainment gap; 95% indicated this, including 62% who were 'very aware'. These findings are similar to those of the 2020 and 2019 surveys, but some variation was evident across key respondent groups; PEF-only schools, those in rural areas and those with lower PEF allocations were less likely to feel that they are aware of potential approaches.

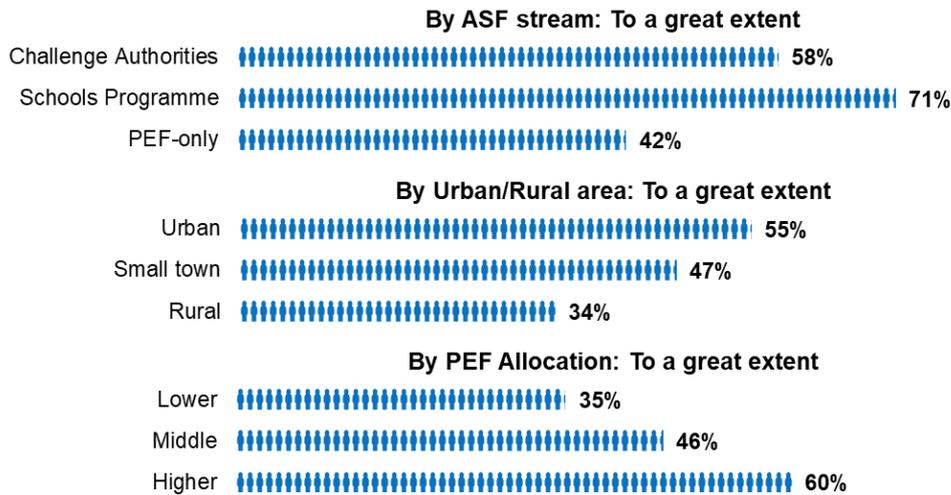
Figure 3: Whether aware of the range of potential approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap



2.4. A large majority of headteachers indicated that they feel confident selecting the most effective approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap; 92% indicated this, very similar to the 2020 and 2019 surveys. There was some variation across key respondent groups with PEF-only schools, those in rural areas and those with lower PEF allocations less likely to feel confident in selecting approaches to closing the gap.

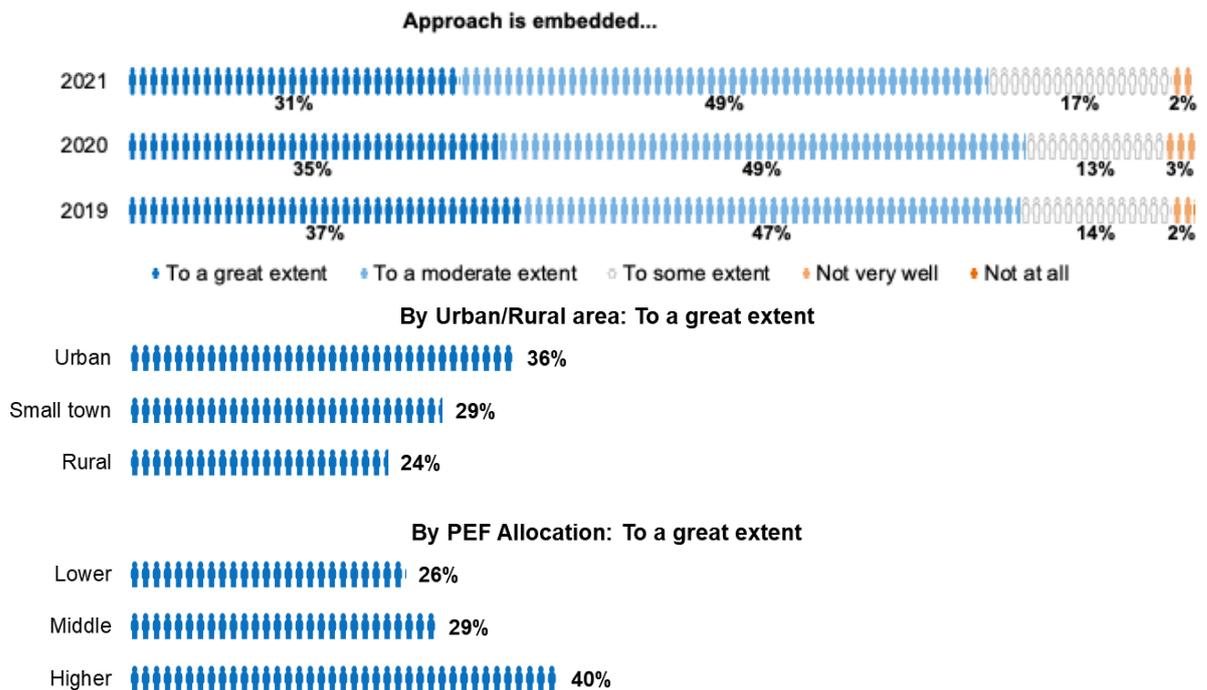
Figure 4: Whether feel confident selecting most effective approach(es)





2.5. The majority of headteachers (81%) felt that the approach to achieving equity in education is embedded within their school community. These findings are very similar to 2020 and 2019 survey results and were consistent across most respondent groups, although it is notable that those in rural areas and those with lower PEF allocations were less likely to feel that their approach to equity was embedded.

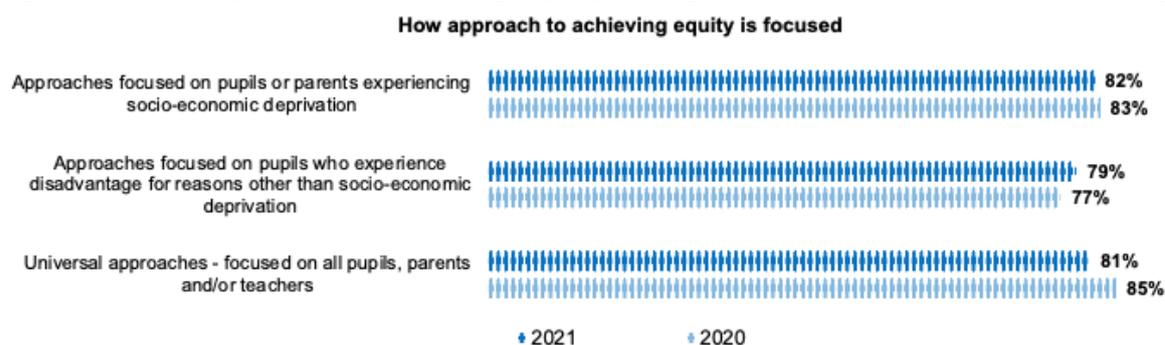
Figure 5: Whether approach to achieving equity is embedded within the school community



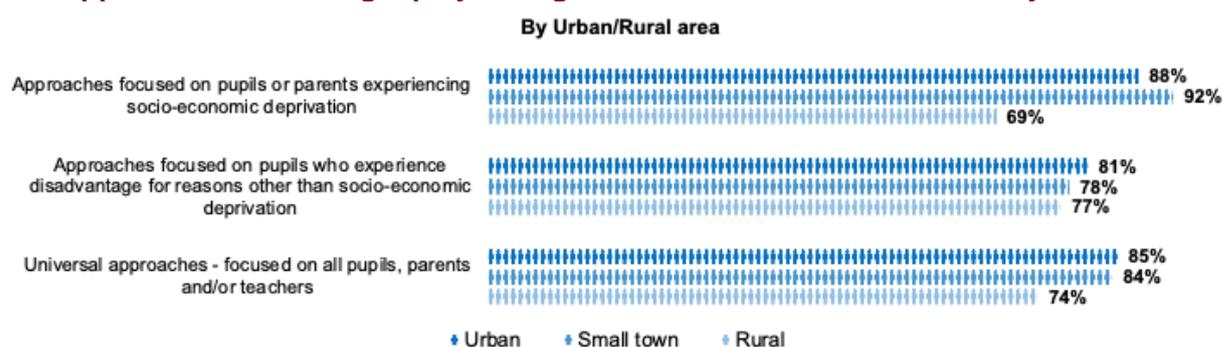
Focus for achieving equity in education

- 2.6. A large majority of survey respondents have included a focus on the pupils or parents experiencing socio-economic deprivation or disadvantage as part of their approach to achieving equity; 82% include a focus on those experiencing socio-economic deprivation and 79% include a focus on other types of disadvantage.
- 2.7. Most took a mixed approach, with 85% indicating that they have used ASF to support 'universal' approaches. The great majority of these (82%) supported universal approaches alongside other approaches with a focus on those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- 2.8. These findings are very similar to previous surveys, and are consistent across most key respondent groups. However, schools in rural areas are less likely to have included a specific focus on those affected by socio-economic deprivation.

Figure 6: How approach to achieving equity is targeted within the school community



How approach to achieving equity is targeted within the school community



- 2.9. Headteachers have seen a range of new circumstances affecting families since school building closures that may need to be taken into account by their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The most common was an increase in pupils and/or parents in need of support with mental health and emotional wellbeing; 99% of headteachers felt this has become more common since school building closures, including 78% who felt this had become 'much more' common.
- 2.10. Other circumstances seen as affecting an increasing number of families were difficulties accessing support services due to COVID-

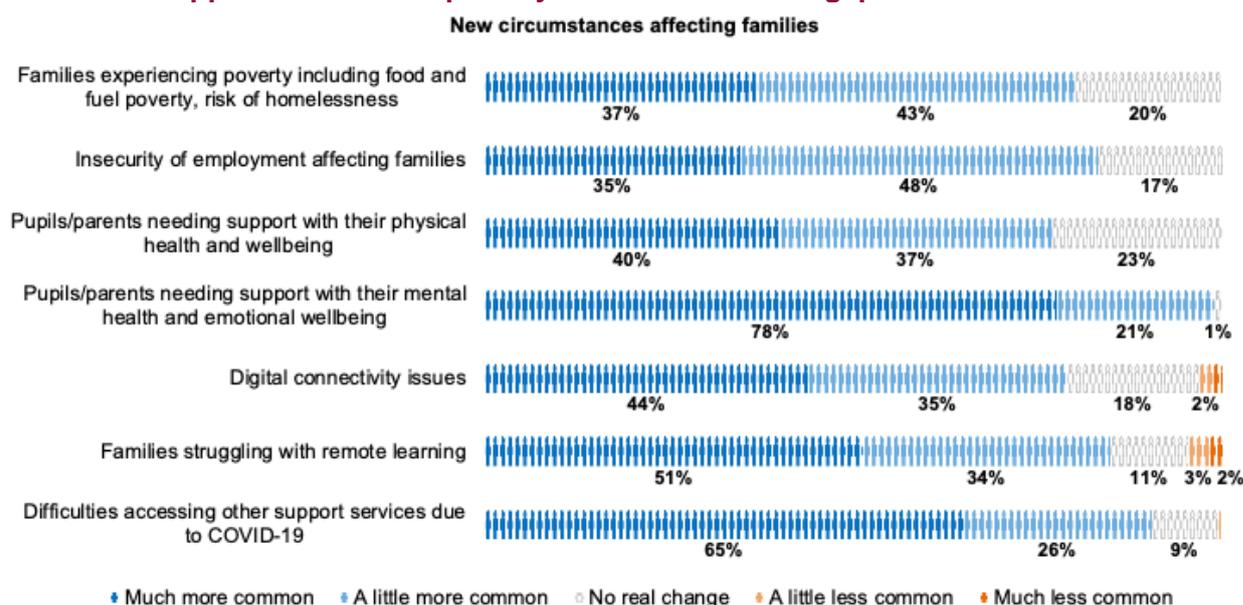
19 (65% felt this is much more common), families struggling with remote learning (51%), digital connectivity issues (44%), and pupils/parents needing support with their physical health and wellbeing (40%).

2.11. Headteachers reporting an increase in digital connectivity issues and needing support with physical health and wellbeing is consistent with the 2020 survey.⁶ However, survey results suggest an increasing focus on pupils and parents in need of support with mental health and emotional wellbeing. While an increase in mental health needs was amongst the new issues raised by respondents to the 2020 survey, this is now (by some margin) the most commonly cited new issue affecting families.

2.12. Survey results also show some variation across key respondent types, particularly in views on the incidence of families affected by poverty and insecurity of employment:

- An increase in the number of families affected by poverty was most likely to be reported by PEF-only schools, secondary schools, those in rural areas and those with higher PEF allocations;
- An increase in families affected by insecurity of employment was most likely to be reported by PEF-only schools; and
- An increase in pupils and parents needing support with their physical health and wellbeing was most likely to be reported by those with higher PEF allocations.

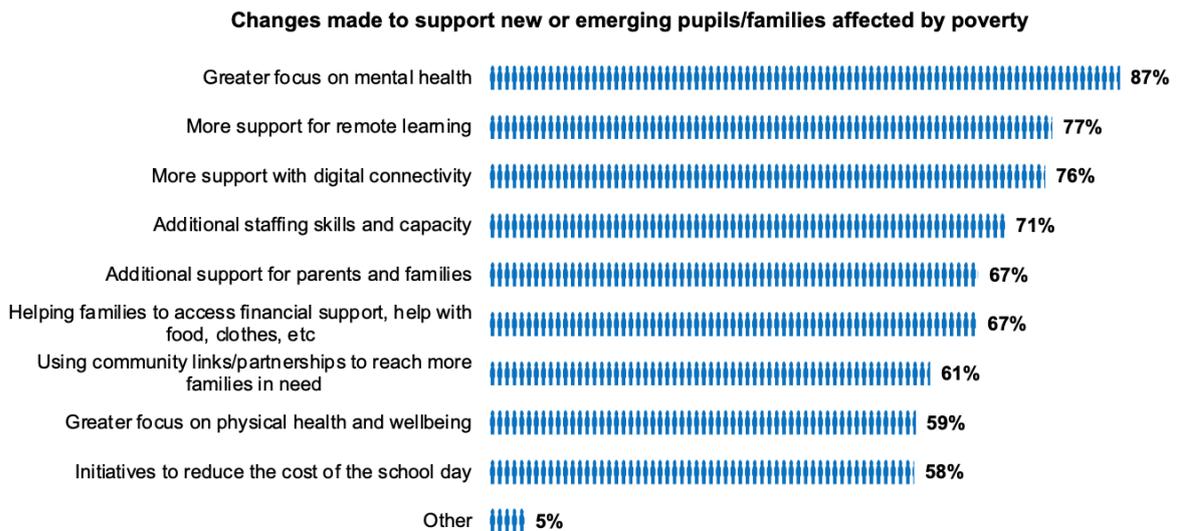
Figure 7: New circumstances emerging since school building closures that may require additional support to close the poverty-related attainment gap



⁶ A change in question structure for the present survey means that direct comparison of results is not possible.

2.13. Headteachers referred to a wide range of approaches used in response to these new circumstances affecting pupils and families. Consistent with the profile of new circumstances listed at Figure 7, the most commonly used approaches were a greater focus on mental health (87% had used this), more support for remote learning (77%), more support with digital connectivity (76%), and additional staffing skills and capacity (71%). These are also consistent with the approaches reported in the 2020 survey.

Figure 8: How adapted approach in response to new circumstances



Responding to changing circumstances

2.14. The majority of survey respondents indicated that their approach to achieving equity had changed from the previous school year (2019/20); 83% indicated this, including 16% where the approach had 'developed significantly'. This is very similar to the 2020 survey, but represents an increase on the 2019 survey where 67% indicated that their approach had changed from the previous year. It is also notable that those with lower PEF allocations were less likely to indicate that their approach had changed.

2.15. Most (77%) further developed their approach to achieving equity during school building closures in January to March 2021. There was some variation in this finding across key respondent groups, with those in rural areas and those with lower PEF allocations less likely than others to have changed their approach to closing the gap during school closures.

2.16. Survey results also suggest that schools where the approach to achieving equity had changed from 2019/20 were also more likely to further develop this during school building closures in 2021. The great majority (91%) of those who had significantly changed their approach from 2019/20 further developed this during school

building closures in 2021, compared to a little more than half of those who had not changed their approach from 2019/20.

Figure 9: To what extent approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap has changed since previous year

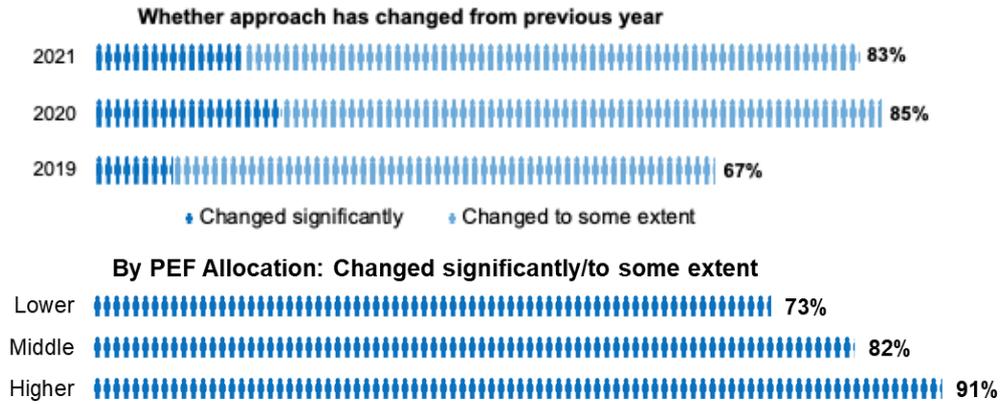
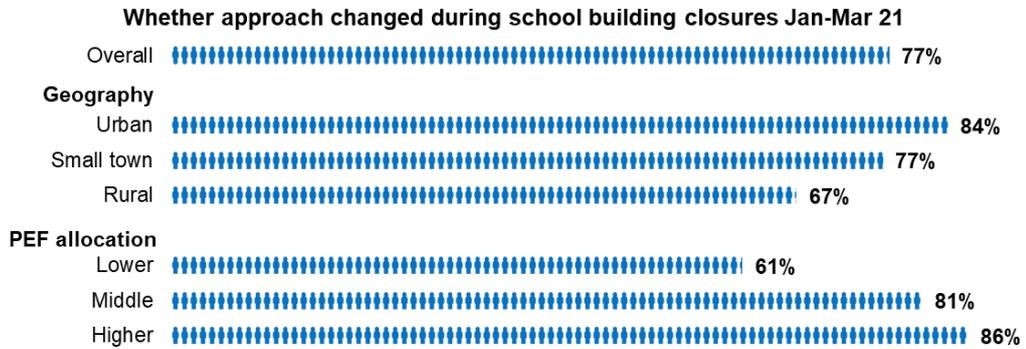
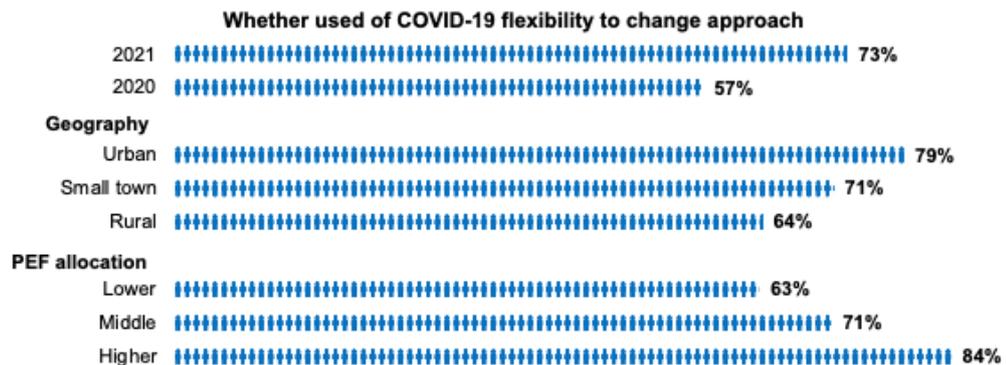


Figure 10: Whether approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap changed during school building closures Jan-Mar 2021



2.17. The majority of schools (73%) had used the greater flexibility in how they use ASF funds introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a 16-point increase on the previous survey. There was some variation across key respondent groups in take-up of this flexibility, most notably that those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations were more likely to have made use of this flexibility.

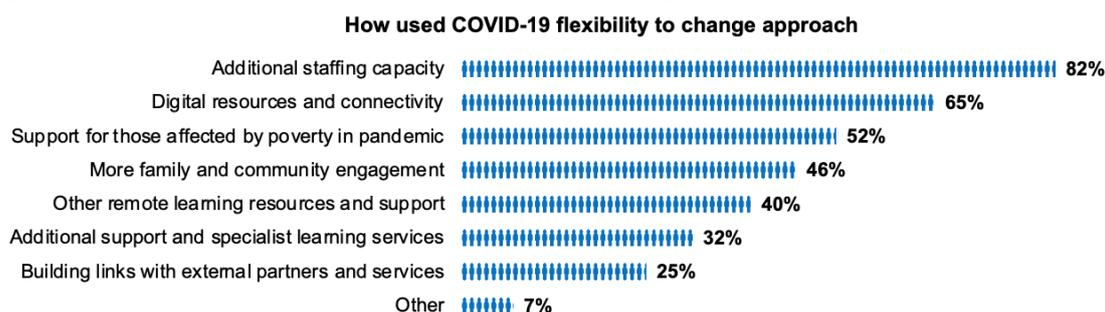
Figure 11: Whether used COVID-19 flexibility to change aspects of how ASF funds used in school



2.18. Flexibility introduced in response to COVID-19 was most commonly used to secure additional staffing capacity; 82% of schools indicated this. In terms of other ways in which flexibility was used, digital resources and connectivity (used by 65%), support for those affected by poverty (52%), and supporting more family and community engagement (46%) were also common. Survey results showed some variation across key respondent groups in how COVID-19 flexibility had been used:

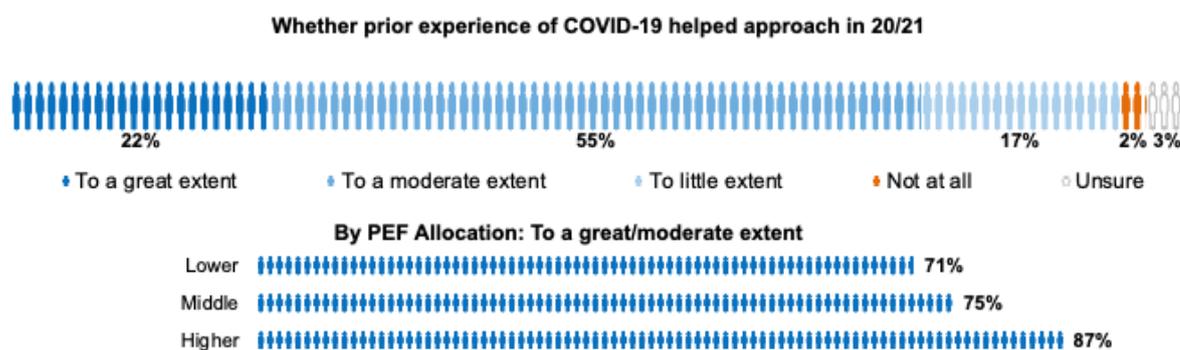
- Support for those affected by poverty was most commonly referenced by Challenge Authority schools, those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations.
- Additional support and specialist learning services were more likely to be mentioned by secondary schools, those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations.
- Building links with external partners was most commonly referenced by Challenge Authority schools, those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations.

Figure 12: How used COVID-19 flexibility to change approach



2.19. The majority of headteachers indicated that their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the previous school year (2019/20) helped their approach during 2020/21; 77% indicated this, including 22% who felt that their prior experience had helped shape their approach 'to a great extent'. Survey results suggest that those with lower or middle PEF allocations were less likely to feel that their approach this year had been helped by their prior experience of COVID-19 in 2019/20.

Figure 13: Whether experience of COVID-19 in 2019/20 helped the approach this year



2.20. Schools were asked to describe in their own words what aspects of 2020/21 they had found more challenging than 2019/20, and what they had found less challenging. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: What aspects of 2020/21 found more challenging than 2019/20 (n=367)

Engaging and supporting families, maintaining communication and meeting support needs remotely	39%
Maintaining remote learning, ongoing digital connectivity/literacy challenges	26%
Increasing pupil mental health and welfare needs, including anxiety around return to school – cumulative impact of pandemic and lockdown periods	25%
Challenges maintaining pupil engagement in learning through the pandemic	25%
Ability of parents and families to support pupils, including the impact of increased poverty and mental health needs	21%
Concerns for staff resilience and morale, including anxiety around return to schools	17%
Responding to staff absences, managing staff workload	15%
Challenges tracking impact and assessing attainment, including concerns around potential widening of the attainment gap	10%
Limited access to other agencies and support services such as CAMHS, speech and language, Educational Psychology	9%
Maintaining the safe operation of the school, responding to changing regulations	9%
Pupil absence due to self-isolation, limited one-to-one contact	8%

Table 4: What aspects of 2020/21 found less challenging than 2019/20 (n=205)

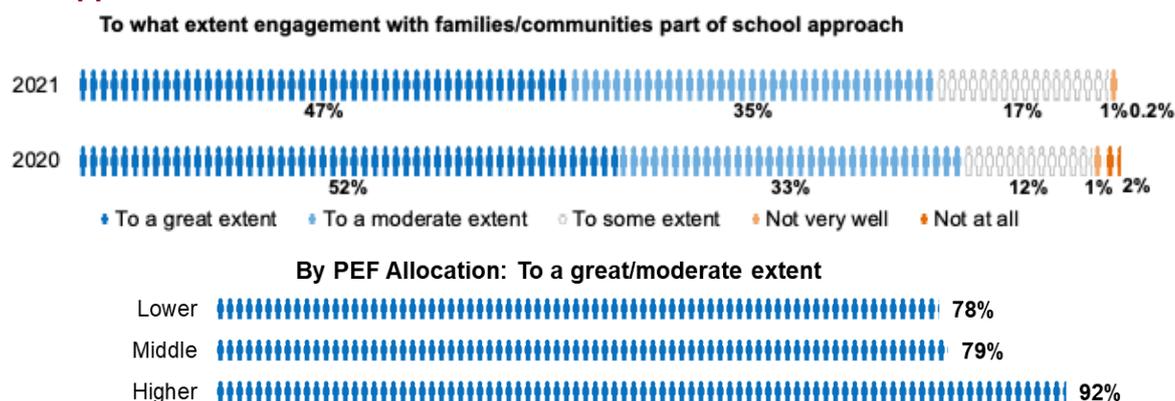
Nothing was less challenging	23%
Improved digital skills for pupils, families and staff, and reduced digital exclusion for families	21%
Refined approach to remote learning and wider response to school building closures – a much smoother transition	20%
Better communication with families, improved understanding of pupil and family needs	13%
More one-to-one contact with pupils, especially important for vulnerable pupils, including those benefiting from hub placements during school building closures	9%
Staff developed skills and adapted approaches	7%
Better engagement with remote learning from pupils and families	7%
Operation of school hubs enabling more targeted and intensive approaches, and increased one-to-one contact with pupils	5%

- 2.21. The aspects which headteachers **most commonly highlighted as having been more challenging** than in the previous year were engaging and supporting families including challenges maintaining communication and meeting support needs without families being able to come into schools; managing remote learning and responding to ongoing digital connectivity and literacy challenges; responding to increased pupil mental health and welfare needs; challenges maintaining pupil engagement in learning as the pandemic continued; reduced ability of parents and families to support pupils including more families being affected by poverty and mental health needs; and concerns for staff resilience and morale. Headteacher comments also noted that some of these challenges – such as concerns for pupils, families and staff resilience – reflected the cumulative impact of the pandemic. This included several headteachers suggesting that some had found the second period of school building closures more challenging, including reports of a more significant adverse impact on pupil wellbeing.
- 2.22. In terms of **aspects of the school year which headteachers had found less challenging** than in the previous year, it is notable that a substantial proportion of respondents suggested that nothing had been less challenging. This included some who felt that 2020/21 had been even more challenging than 2019/20.
- 2.23. For those who had seen less challenging aspects of their experience, these most commonly reflected areas where schools were able to draw on their previous experience of the pandemic. This included improved digital skills for pupils, families and staff; a more refined approach to remote learning resulting in a smoother transition during school building closures; and better communication with families leading to an improved understanding of pupil and family needs.

Engagement with families and communities

- 2.24. The majority of survey respondents had used engagement with families and communities as part of their school's approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap; 82% indicated this, including 47% who used family/community engagement 'to a great extent'. This is very similar to the previous survey. Findings also show some variation across key respondent groups; as was found in 2020, those with higher PEF allocations were more likely to have used family and community engagement.

Figure 14: To what extent engagement with families and communities has been part of school's approach



2.25. Schools were asked to describe in their own words how they had developed their approach to family and community engagement in 2020/21, particularly during school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 5.

Table 5: How developed approach to family engagement during 2020/21 (n=410)

More 'outreach' communication with families inc. regular 'check in', gathering feedback, improving understanding of circumstances/needs	66%
Use of digital resources/platforms and provision of digital support	32%
More tailored approach, supporting the most vulnerable families	24%
More community engagement, building links with community support	14%
Provision of remote learning resources	13%
Tackling poverty, deprivation, supporting access to financial support, support with food and clothing	11%
Greater focus on wellbeing including mental health and emotional support, counselling	9%

2.26. Consistent with the 2020 survey, **extending use of 'outreach' communication** was the most common way in which schools' approaches to family and community engagement had developed. The majority of those providing comment referred to increasing contact with families to build relationships, and to improve the identification and understanding of local needs. This included some referring to family wellbeing checks was part of a wider focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing.

We were in touch with our families on a weekly basis by phone. Teaching staff spoke to their class and usually parents on a daily basis, leaving voice notes of encouragement in their feedback. Senior Management Team picked up families needing more support, ensuring those families received the time they needed. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

*Some families were contacted more often, depending on their needs. The chats were informal, prioritising the wellbeing of all but opportunities were used to discuss and support learning. These calls were tracked and monitored. The school also worked closely with partners to support families...families were also supported by the head teacher and partners to access financial aid.
(Schools Programme school in a rural area)*

- 2.27. A substantial proportion of respondents also described their **use of digital resources and platforms** as part of their engagement with families, including the provision of digital support to those with limited connectivity and/or digital literacy. This included specific reference to greater use of social media as a communication and engagement tool, and to resources or platforms such as MS Teams, Seesaw and Google Classroom enabling schools to maintain more frequent 'continuous' communication with families.

*Communication with parents is more continuous through [digital platforms]. Parents are happy to see their children's learning journeys and still very much feel part of the school community. Online parent meetings are more regular, shorter and more productive. Parents' skills in IT have developed to enable them to engage with school.
(PEF-only school in rural area)*

- 2.28. A specific focus on **engagement and support with the most vulnerable families** was highlighted as a key aspect of outreach communication for some respondents. These schools referred to having used a range of communication options such as telephone, video messages and social media, and use of engagement approaches such as survey approaches, and virtual sessions focused on issues such as health and wellbeing, mindfulness, and family quizzes or other social events.

*Our direct support to families became more focussed in terms of health and wellbeing and support for remote learning. The group of young people who we considered to be most at risk had a programme of focussed support. Our partners were able to continue their work and extend it with an increased emphasis on financial support and access to other services such as food banks.
(PEF-only school in small town)*

*A more personalised approach with regular calls to families struggling to engage, doorstep visits and tailored home learning packs. Once allowed, bubble group sessions for targeted children improved connection with families. The use of See-Saw platform increased parental engagement, as did online live assemblies and weekly family quizzes. These were often the highlight of the week.
(PEF-only school in rural area)*

2.29. The survey also asked headteachers about what they felt were the main learning points from their experience of family and community engagement in 2020/21. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 6.

Table 6: Main learning points from engagement with families and communities (n=368)

Proactive communication, building relationships, maintaining engagement especially when limited to remote contact	54%
Impact of home environment, parents' capacity to support pupils learning	34%
Importance of digital skills and connectivity in supporting pupils' learning	31%
Role of schools as sources of wellbeing support for pupils and families	29%
Importance of building a real understanding of families circumstances and needs	13%
A focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing	11%
The impact of poverty, deprivation and disadvantage on families	8%

2.30. The value of **proactive communication and approaches to maintain engagement with families** was the most commonly cited learning point from schools' engagement with families and communities. This included reference to the challenges of building and maintaining relationships with families, particularly where restrictions limit scope for in-person contact with families.

The importance of regular communication with parents/carers to ensure they feel included when they are not able to visit the school in the way they would have previously.
(PEF-only school in urban area)

Communication has been key to continued engagement. Information should be shared in smaller, more digestible chunks - families had so much to deal with that they needed this. It has become even more important to spend time with families, talking and listening.
(PEF-only school in rural area)

2.31. Headteachers also highlighted the extent to which their experience of family engagement during the pandemic had highlighted the **important role of the home environment and parents' capacity to support pupils' learning**.

Don't assume everyone has same ability to support children at home. Not all children will get the same experience, no matter what you provide or how creative the teaching is...they need to be in school. Parents have little confidence in supporting pupils at home, and some themselves have poor literacy/numeracy. Parents need to be further encouraged to have a greater role in their children's learning.
(PEF-only school in urban area)

2.32. Schools indicated that their experience, particularly during periods of school building closure, had highlighted the **importance of digital skills and connectivity**. This included reference to the value of improved digital skills within schools, and the support required to ensure families can make effective use of digital resources available to them.

Equity - all had access to digital technology and connectivity during the pandemic as we were able to support this. Much more support had to be put into upskilling parents so they could both get online and also support than the relatively easier quick fixes of connectivity.
(PEF-only school in rural area)

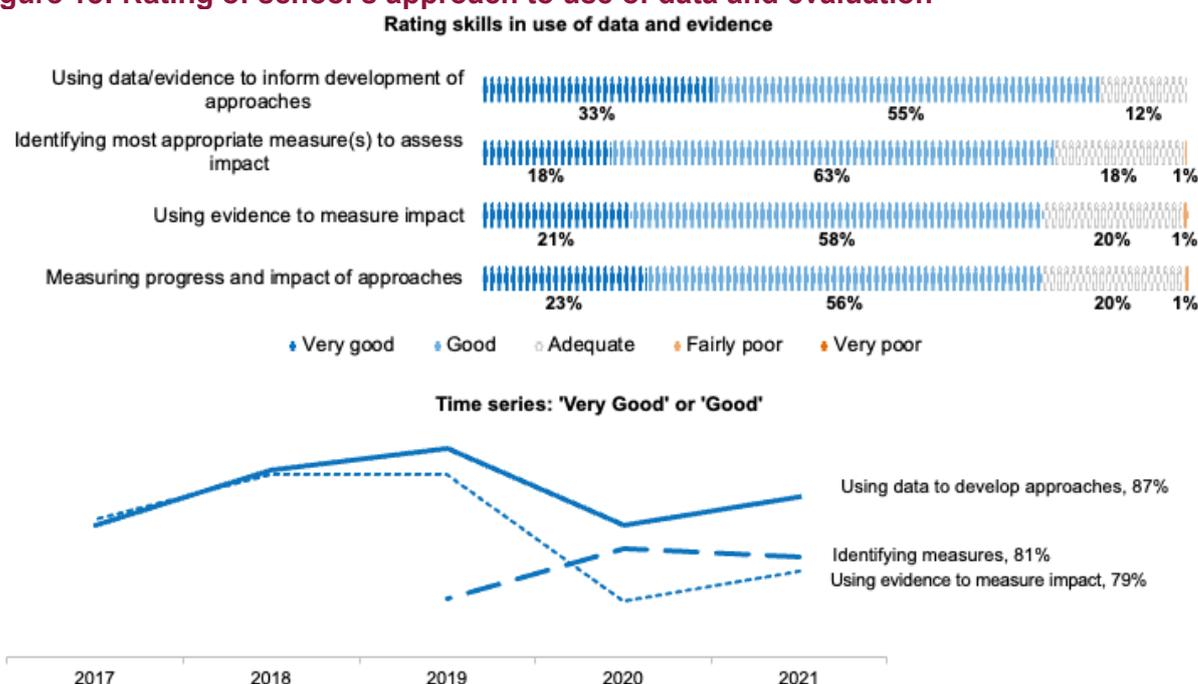
2.33. A substantial number of headteachers also referred to the **increased role that schools have played in providing support to pupils and families**. This reflected the value of building positive relationships with families and communities, with some suggesting that building trust had led to more families turning to schools for support.

In times of social isolation, many parents turn to the school for support in cases of family breakdown/domestic situations/support with finances. Many families trust school and staff with their worries and concerns and believe we can support them.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3. Use of data and evaluation

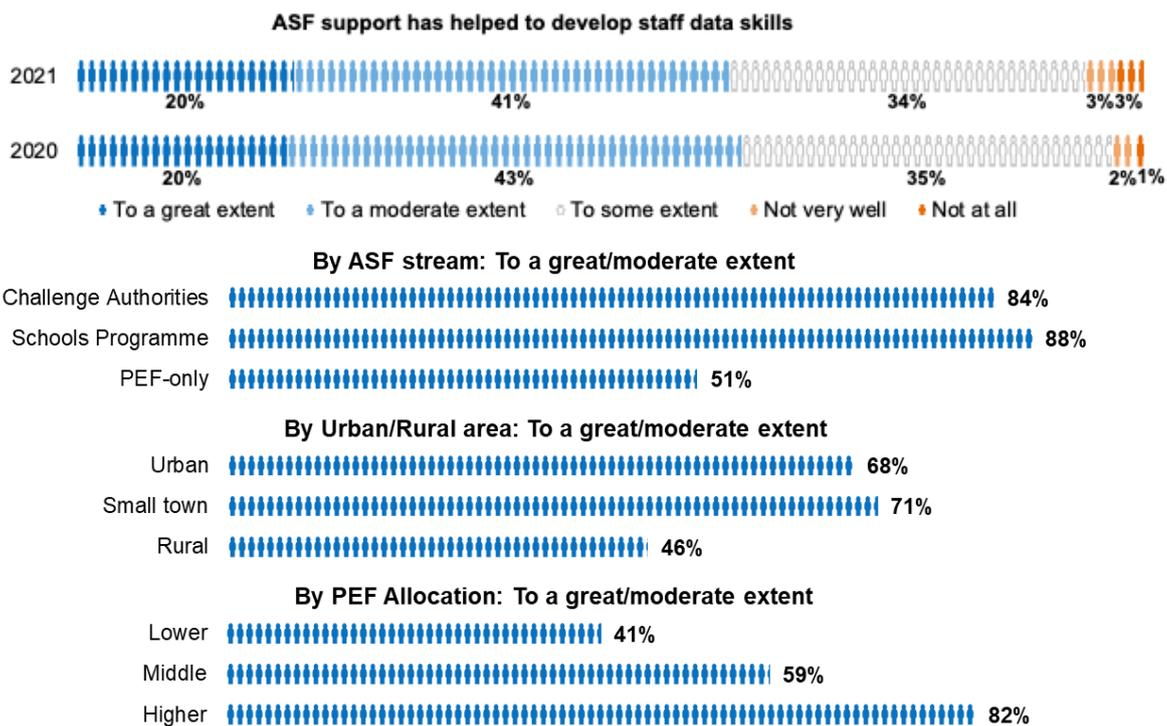
- 3.1. This section summarises survey findings on schools’ use of data and evaluation in relation to ASF-supported approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 3.2. A large majority of survey respondents felt that they are ‘very good’ or ‘good’ in using data and evidence to inform development of their approach; 87% indicated this. This is similar to the 2020 survey.
- 3.3. Headteachers were also positive about their skills in measuring the impact of their approaches; 81% were positive about their ability to identify appropriate measures, and 79% were positive about their use of evidence to measure impact. Again, these results are similar to the 2020 survey, although they remain below the 2019 survey.
- 3.4. More than three quarters (79%) felt that they are ‘very good’ or ‘good’ at measuring the progress and impact of ASF-supported approaches, similar to the 2020 survey. It is also notable that PEF-only schools, those with lower PEF allocations and those in rural areas were less positive than others on this indicator.

Figure 15: Rating of school’s approach to use of data and evaluation



- 3.5. The majority of schools felt that ASF support has helped to develop staff skills and knowledge in using data and evaluation; 61% indicated that ASF had helped to develop these skills to a ‘great’ or ‘moderate’ extent. Survey findings show significant variation across key respondent groups; those with lower PEF allocations, those in rural areas, and PEF-only schools were less positive on this measure.

Figure 16: To what extent ASF support helped to develop staff skills and knowledge in using data and evaluation



4. Impact

4.1. This section summarises views on the impact of ASF-supported approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This includes the factors that contribute to or limit success, and whether impacts are likely to be sustainable.

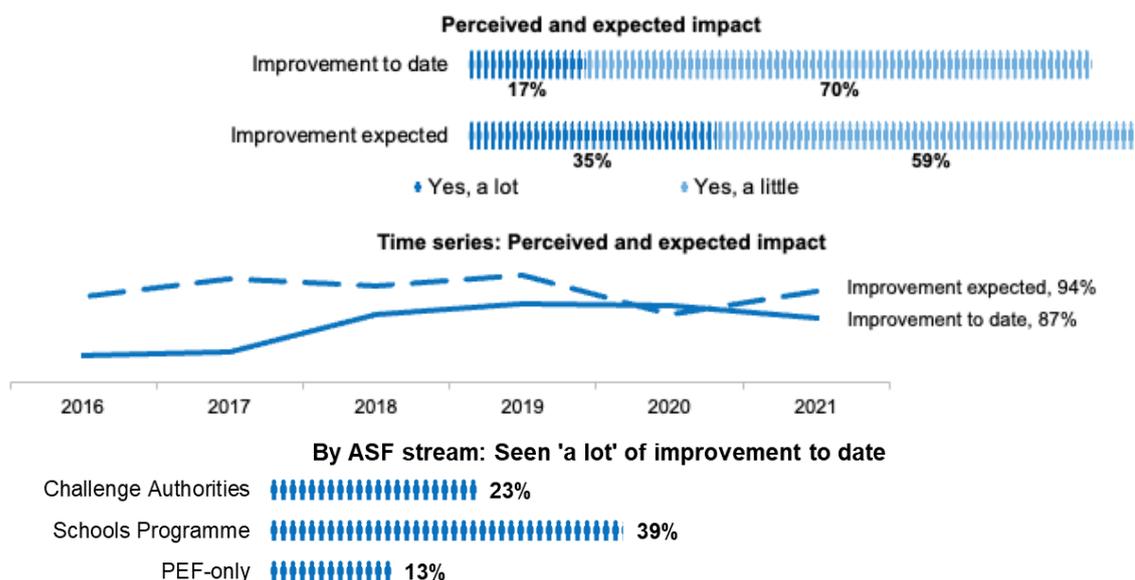
Progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap

4.2. A large majority (87%) of survey respondents reported seeing an improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment and/or health and wellbeing during 2020/21 as a result of ASF supported approaches. This included 17% that had seen ‘a lot’ of improvement to date. These findings were similar to previous surveys (90% had seen improvement in 2019/20, and 91% in 2018/19), and were broadly consistent across key respondent groups – although as discussed at Section 8, findings are not wholly consistent with published attainment data.

4.3. Although there has been no significant change in the proportion of schools who had seen improvement in closing the gap during 2020/21, there has been an increase in those expecting improvement in the future. The great majority of schools (94%) expected to see improvement in closing the gap over the next few years, a 6-point increase since the 2020 survey (although this followed a 10-point reduction between 2019 and 2020).

4.4. Survey responses also indicated some correlation between schools having already seen improvement, and expectations of further improvement; 78% of those who had seen ‘a lot’ of improvement to date expected to see ‘a lot’ more, compared with just 28% of those who had only seen ‘a little’ improvement to date.

Figure 17: Perceived improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment or health/wellbeing



4.5. Headteachers were asked to provide written comment in support of their response around perceived improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in their school. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 7.

Table 7: Comments on perceived improvement in closing the gap

Those who have seen 'a lot' of improvement (n=86)	
Ability to implement approaches relevant to school, effective targeting	26%
Teaching and staffing resources	24%
Focus on health and wellbeing, including mental health and nurture	21%
Use of evidence/data and approach to evaluation	12%
Higher quality learning and teaching	7%
Have made progress despite lockdown disruption to learning (use of remote learning, additional resources) etc to mitigate impact	5%
Training and skills development	5%
Those who have not seen any improvement (n=29)	
Impact of pandemic, lack of face-to-face contact, pressure on resources	31%
Pressure on staff time, workload (including COVID-19 related absence)	21%
Limited PEF allocation	21%
Headteacher new in post, too early to say for this year	14%
Pressures on families, remote learning	3%

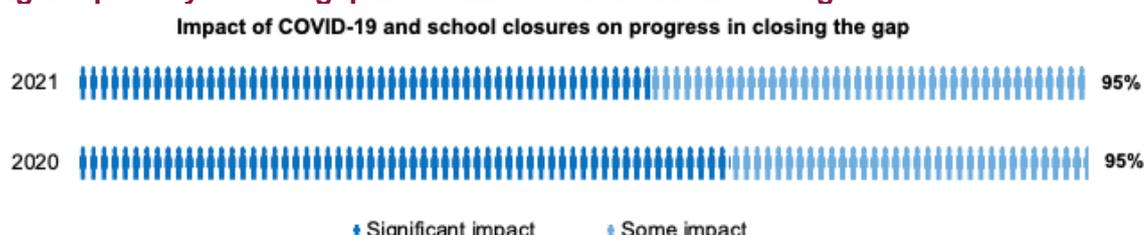
4.6. For **schools that have seen 'a lot' of improvement**, comments most commonly related to schools' capacity to implement approaches relevant to local needs – also identified as a key factor influencing impact for schools (see Table 9). Comments also referred to teaching and staffing resources (including schools which identified staffing input as a key driver of improvement, and where this informed ongoing approaches) and to the value of a focus on health and wellbeing, including further staffing input from external agencies including specific reference to mental health support.

4.7. For **schools that have not seen any improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap**, comments most commonly referred to the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These schools referred to limited in-person contact with pupils as a result of school building closures and increased pupil absences. Some were of the view that this may have resulted in a worsening of the poverty-related attainment gap. Schools also referred to other factors, including pressure on staff time as a result of COVID-19 related absence, and to a view that the level of PEF allocation had limited scope to secure improvement in the attainment gap.

4.8. The great majority of schools (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in

closing the poverty-related attainment gap, identical to 2020 survey findings. This included 54% who felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had a ‘significant impact’ on their progress. Those with lower PEF allocations, those in rural areas and PEF-only schools were most likely to feel that their progress had been significantly affected by COVID-19 and school building closures.

Figure 18: Perceived impact of COVID-19 and school building closures on progress in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment or health/wellbeing



4.9. Headteachers were asked to provide written comment in support of their response around the impact of COVID-19 and school building closures on closing the poverty-related attainment gap in their school. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 8.

Table 8: COVID-19 and school closures have had a ‘significant’ impact on closing the poverty-related attainment gap (n=195)

Limited engagement in remote learning and lack of one-to-one contact – especially for more vulnerable/disadvantaged pupils	58%
Challenges for parents and families supporting home learning	24%
Impact of the pandemic on mental health and emotional wellbeing of pupils, families and staff	15%
Pupils having difficulty adjusting to the return to school building, some having lost learning skills/motivation	14%
Pupil learning affected by wider impacts of COVID-19 including health and wellbeing, increased number affected by poverty	12%
Challenges for pupils with limited access to digital devices and connectivity	9%
Impact of ongoing pupil absences, including due to COVID-19 anxiety	7%
Pressures on staffing, including due to absences	5%

Factors influencing impact

4.10. In addition to variation across respondent groups (such as funding stream, PEF allocation and urban/rural geography), survey analysis also considered correlation between perceived progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap and other aspects of headteachers’ experiences. This analysis considered a range of factors including schools’ approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, headteachers’ understanding and awareness in shaping that approach, embedding equity, use of evidence, collaborative working, and views on the effectiveness of PEF.

4.11. This analysis indicates that a number of respondent groups are more likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap (see Table 9). In particular, survey results indicate that key factors in closing the poverty-related attainment gap include **tailoring use of ASF support to local needs, changes of culture or ethos** (such as embedding the approach to equity), **effective use of data and evidence** (for example to inform approaches and measure impact), and **engagement with families and communities**.

4.12. The range of factors influencing impact is broadly similar to that reported in previous surveys. Factors identified as having a significant impact on perceived progress in closing the gap are:

- use of PEF to meet local needs (a new question for 2021, not previously identified as significant);⁷
- the approach to equity being embedded;
- use of data to inform approaches (identified as significant for the first time this year);
- engagement with families and communities (increasing in ranking from the 7th to the 4th most significant factor);
- ASF helping to develop staff data skills; and
- Increased collaborative working.

Table 9: Respondent groups most likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap

Respondent group	2021	2020
Feel that PEF has been used effectively to meet local needs	1	n/a
Feel that approach to achieving equity has been embedded within school community	2	1
Feel their use of data to inform approaches is 'very good' or 'good'	3	-
Engagement with families and communities has been part of the school approach	4	7
Feel ASF has helped to develop staff data and evidence skills	5	3
Have seen an increase in collaborative working	6	4
Feel their use of data and evidence to measure impact is 'very good' or 'good'	7	6
Feel their measuring of progress and impact of approaches is 'very good' or 'good'	8	5
Feel they are 'very good' or 'good' at identifying the most appropriate approaches	9	-

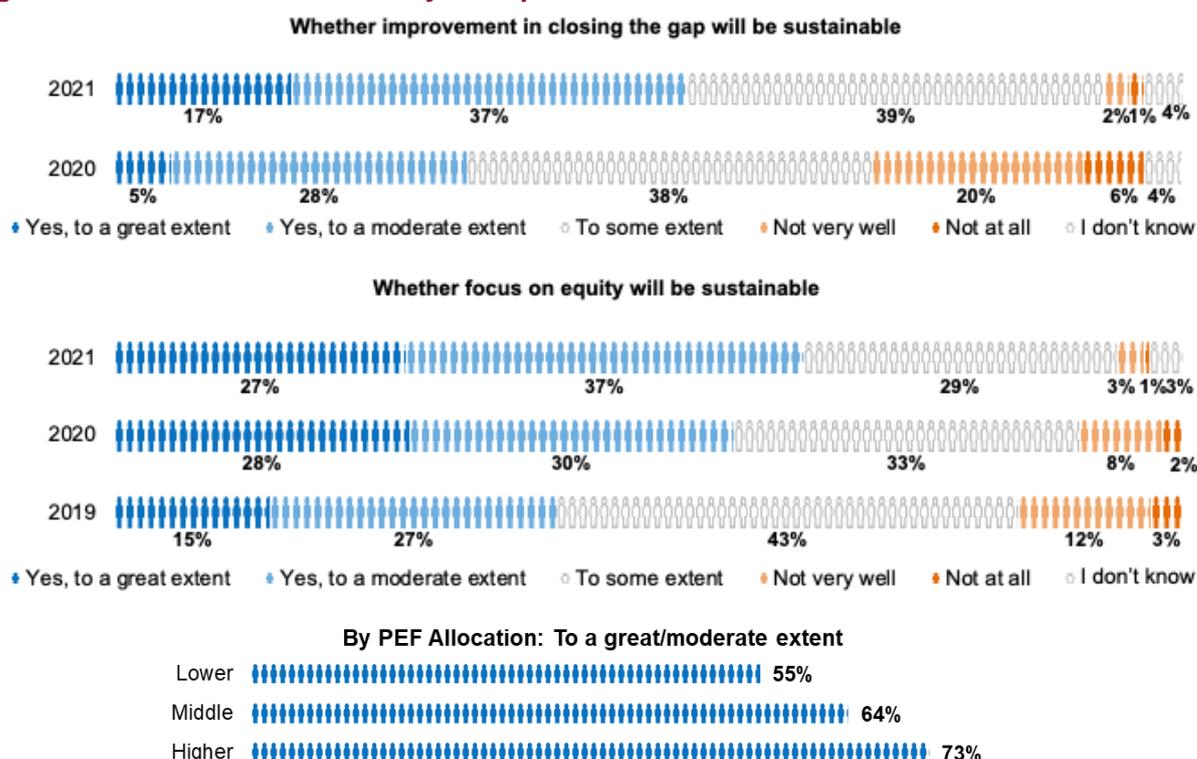
⁷ While this survey question related specifically to how use of PEF has been tailored to meet local needs, it should be noted that comments from survey respondents referred to the importance of tailoring use of ASF support more widely to respond to local circumstances and needs – see Table 7, and further discussion at section 8.

Sustainability

4.13. More than half (54%) of survey respondents expected that the ASF supported improvement they had seen to date will be sustainable. This represents a 21-point increase from the 2020 survey, although it should be noted that question wording was changed for the present survey.⁸ Survey findings suggest that views on the sustainability of improvement to date were broadly consistent across key respondent groups.

4.14. Views were more positive on the extent to which the focus on equity will be sustainable; 65% felt that this will be the case, a seven-point increase from the 2020 survey, and 17-point increase from 2019 survey. Survey findings also show some variation across key respondent groups; schools with a lower PEF allocation were less likely to feel that the focus on equity will be sustainable.

Figure 19: Views on sustainability of improvements



4.15. Schools had the opportunity to provide written comment in support of their view that progress to date and/or the focus on equity in their school will be sustainable. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 10.

⁸ The 2020 survey asked whether improvement would be “sustainable beyond the years of funding”. Previous changes to question structure limit scope for comparison with surveys prior to 2020.

Table 10: Those who feel progress/focus will be sustainable (n=131)

Staff training, skills development	54%
Embedded practice, pedagogy development	29%
Developed capacity to use data/evidence to inform approaches	18%
Raising awareness and change of ethos/culture	14%
Ongoing access to resources	10%
Collaboration within school, with partners and parents	5%

- 4.16. Those who felt that **progress to date and/or the focus on equity will be sustainable** most commonly suggested that staff skills and capacity developed with ASF support will be sustainable, even if initiatives themselves cannot continue in their current form with reduced staffing levels. The importance of staff skills and training was also highlighted specifically in relation to developing capacity to use evidence to inform approaches. Schools also referred to ensuring the sustainability of the focus on equity by embedding use of evidence in monitoring progress as part of the school culture.
- 4.17. Several schools referred to use of ASF support to develop whole school approaches to equity, for example embedding the approach in school policies, training materials and wider culture. Some specifically highlighted these whole school approaches as a means of ensuring future staff turnover does not undermine sustainability.

*Staff have been trained in various interventions so this should be sustainable for as long as they are in this school. The additional adult support will be harder to sustain when no recovery staff.
(PEF-only school in rural area)*

*We have not isolated teachers for training but instead have developed whole school approaches. Clear policies which detail our approach, and training materials have been made to ensure that any turnover in staff will not result in approaches being lost. Embedded processes for monitoring and tracking can be sustained as a culture of openness to support and challenge has been developed.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

*High staff turnover in a small school can make investment in staff training a non-sustainable use of PEF. To overcome this, the approach and training will be embedded in our school curriculum design/literacy policy, it will become part of the culture of the school and through parental involvement, families will be aware so it will be the responsibility of future staff members and the team around them to ensure the investment and improvement is sustainable.
(PEF-only school in rural area)*

4.18. Survey responses also considered the importance of having embedded approaches to achieving equity across the school, including through improved pedagogy. These respondents referred to sustainability of practice in relation to literacy and numeracy, but also the sustainability of improvements in school culture and ethos.

*As approaches become embedded into school practice then they become more sustainable. Targeted interventions will still be needed as young people are identified that require individual support.
(PEF-only school in urban area)*

*The most sustainable approach is to improve the quality of pedagogy and approaches to relationships and ethos within schools. If we can get this right and keep the focus on genuinely providing equity, then we may be able to sustain our progress.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

4.19. Schools who did not expect progress to date and/or the focus on equity in their school to be sustainable also had the opportunity to provide written comment in support of this view. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 11.

Table 11: Those who feel progress/focus will not be sustainable (n=25)

Loss of staffing and skills	76%
Loss of initiatives and approaches/interventions	24%
Difficult to predict at present, potential future impact of COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures on attainment	16%
Reduction in wider budgets/resourcing	12%

4.20. The view that **progress and/or the focus on equity will not be sustainable** was most commonly based on concerns that staffing levels cannot be sustained without access to funding. These schools noted that securing additional staff time and skills had been central to their use of ASF support, and to delivery of approaches to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap.

*All our PEF has been spent on staffing, this has allowed us to deliver additional support for those pupils who are most in need. When this additionality is withdrawn and we lose this staffing there will be no way we can keep this commitment in place and it is likely we will need to move to a more generic universal support model.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

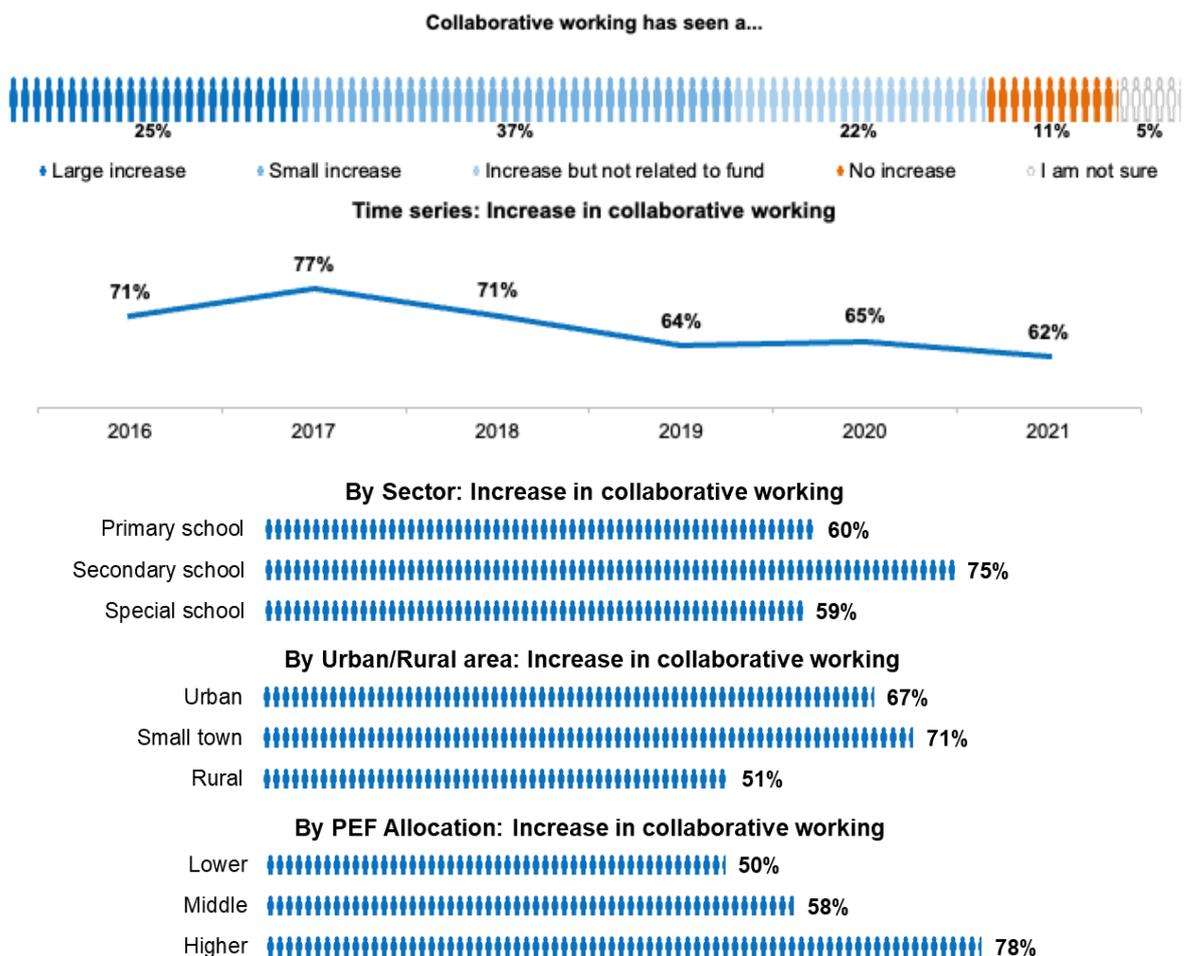
4.21. The importance of staffing levels were also cited in relation to the sustainability of initiatives and approaches. Several schools suggested that existing initiatives could not be sustained without the staffing and other resources secured by ASF support.

*The improvements have been made due to additional staffing. Withdrawal of this staffing would mean less opportunities for our learners to be able to access programmes. People make the difference. Very little in the way of pedagogical approaches can give the same results for our children in closing the gap.
(PEF-only school in urban area)*

5. Collaborative working

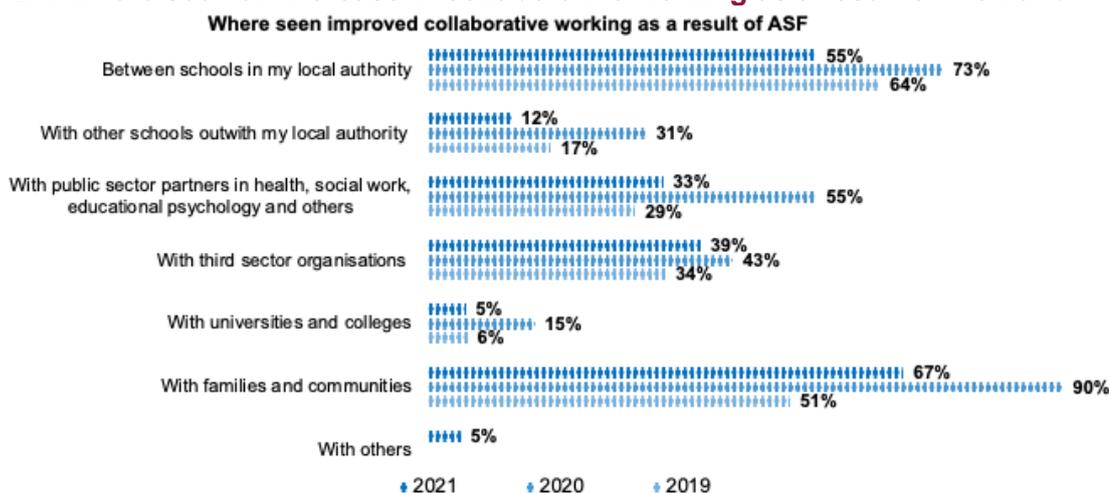
- 5.1. This section summarises views on whether and how ASF support has contributed to an increase in collaborative working.
- 5.2. The majority of survey respondents had seen an increase in collaborative working in their school as a result of ASF support. Nearly two thirds (62%) indicated this, including a quarter (25%) who had seen a large increase in collaborative working as a result of the fund. This was broadly consistent with 2020 survey findings, although the proportion reporting increased collaboration has fallen consistently since the 2017 survey (by 15-percentage points over this period).
- 5.3. Survey findings show some variation in school experiences around collaborative working. In particular, those with lower PEF allocations, those in rural areas and primary schools were less likely to have seen an increase in collaborative working.

Figure 20: Whether seen an increase in collaborative working as a result of the Fund



- 5.4. In terms of types of collaborative working, schools were most likely to have seen an increase in collaboration with families and communities (reported by 67% of schools), and other schools in their local authority (55%). A substantial proportion of schools also mentioned increased collaboration with third sector organisations (39%) and public sector partners (33%).
- 5.5. Survey findings show fewer schools reporting increased collaboration with families and communities (down by 23-points since 2020 - although as Figure 14 shows, a large majority of schools indicated that engagement with families and communities remained part of their approach to equity), public sector partners (-22 points), and other schools in their local authority (-18 points).
- 5.6. There was some variation across respondent groups, particularly for collaboration with third sector organisations. Challenge Authority schools, secondary schools, those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations were most likely to have increased collaborative working with third sector organisations.

Figure 21: Where seen an increase in collaborative working as a result of the Fund



- 5.7. Headteachers were asked to provide comment outlining any new collaborations that have emerged during the period of school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 12.

Table 12: New collaborations established (n=189)

With third sector organisations and community groups	60%
With public sector organisations, particularly health and social care, mental health services	31%
With other schools, primarily local cluster	13%
With families and communities	7%
With private sector organisations	4%

- 5.8. **Work with third sector organisations and community groups** was the most commonly referenced new collaboration for schools, mentioned by more than half. This included national charities such as Barnardo's and Action for Children, local voluntary organisations including a particular focus on those supporting families affected by poverty, and local faith groups.
- 5.9. Around a third of those providing comment referred to new or improved collaboration with **public sector organisations**. This included schools working with NHS services, local authority services (including social work, Community Learning & Development, housing and financial inclusion), and Police Scotland.

6. Pupil Equity Funding

6.1. This section summarises schools' experience around application for and receipt of PEF. This includes views on processes around the development of schools' approach, and the specific impact of PEF-supported approaches.

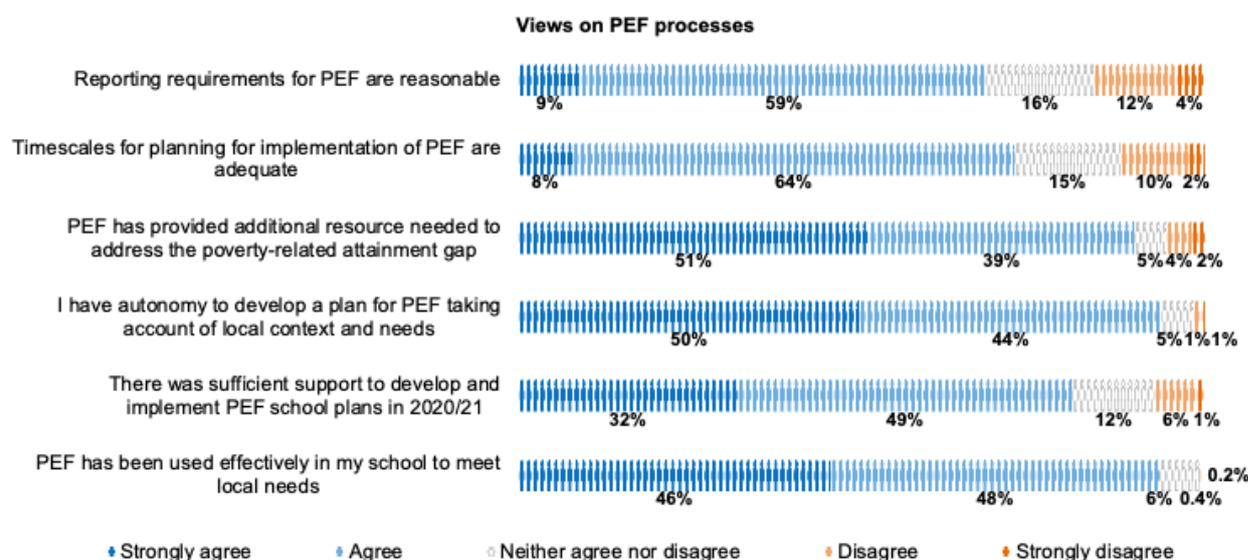
PEF processes and developing schools' approach

6.2. Survey respondents were generally positive in relation to PEF processes. Most (67%) felt that reporting requirements associated with PEF were reasonable, and a similar proportion felt that timescales for planning for PEF have been sufficient (71%). These findings were broadly similar to previous surveys.

6.3. The great majority of headteachers also felt that there was sufficient support to develop and implement PEF school plans (80% indicated this) and that they had autonomy to develop plans that are responsive to their local context and needs (93%). These views were again similar to the 2020 and 2019 survey, although the proportion who feel they had autonomy to develop their plans has increased by 12 percentage points since the 2017 survey.⁹ Views were also consistent across key respondent groups.

6.4. Views were also highly positive on whether PEF had provided additional resource needed to address the poverty-related attainment gap (89% felt this has been the case), and that PEF had been used effectively to meet their school's needs (93%). Views on whether PEF has provided additional resource have remained consistent over previous surveys.

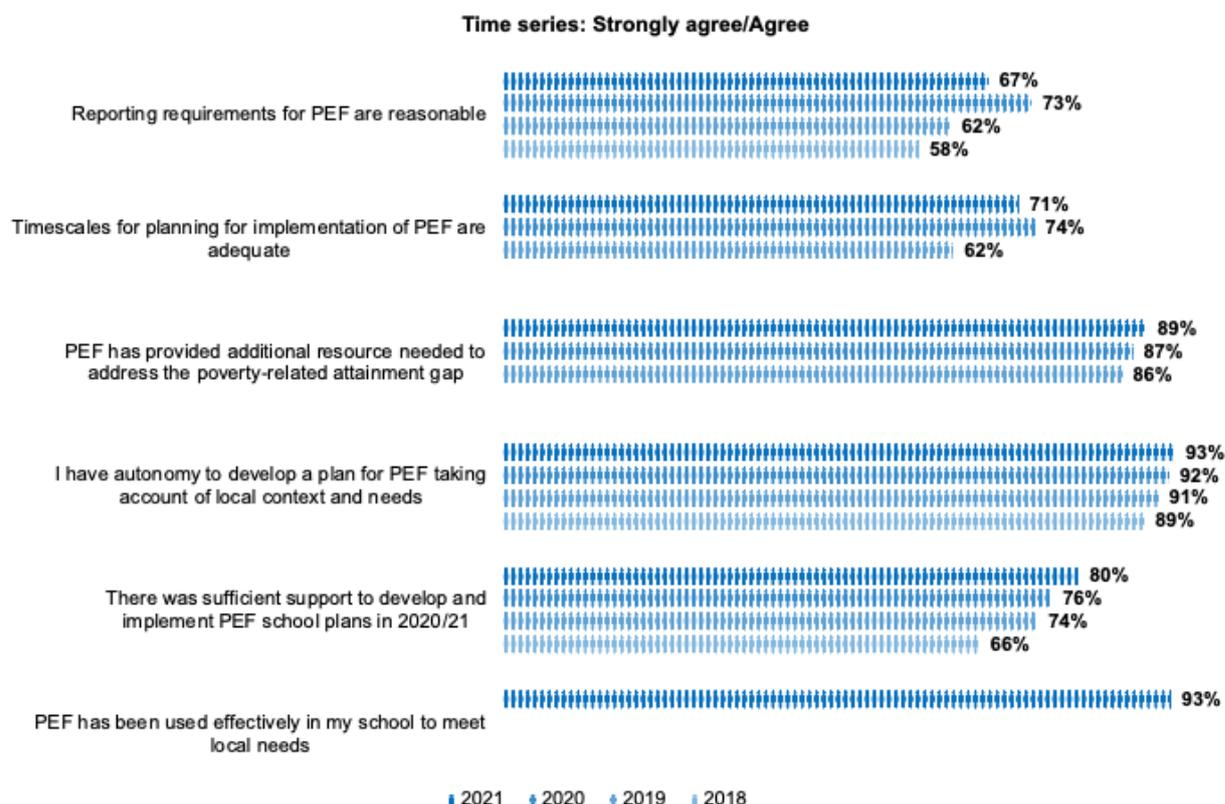
Figure 22: Views on PEF processes



⁹ A change in question structure limits comparison of views on access to support prior to the 2019 survey.

- 6.5. Most respondents indicated that they had drawn on multiple resources in developing plans for PEF. The most commonly used were teachers within the school (used by 91%), local guidance published by local authorities (90%), parents and communities (78%), children and young people (74%) and local authorities (72%).
- 6.6. This profile is broadly similar to that reported in the previous survey. There has been a 13-point fall in the proportion of schools referring to Education Scotland, although this has fluctuated from year to year over previous surveys. Similarly, a 10-point fall in the proportion referring to parents and communities as an information source is from a peak in the 2020 survey (currently findings are similar to the 2019 survey).
- 6.7. Survey results also show some variation across key respondent groups. The most significant are noted below.
- Challenge Authority schools, those in urban areas and those with higher PEF allocations were more likely than others to consult with parents and communities.
 - Secondary schools and those with higher PEF allocations were more likely to consult Education Endowment Foundation resources.

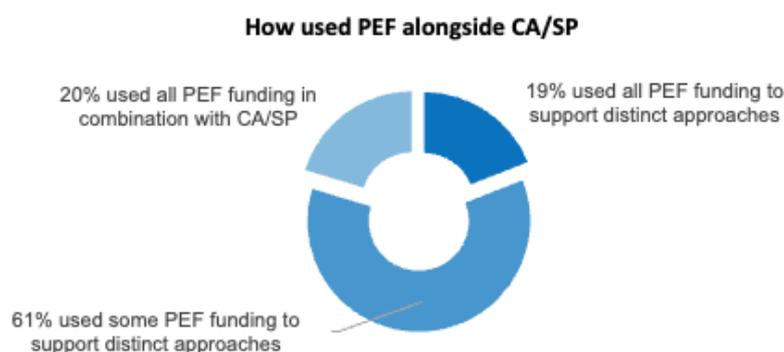
Figure 23: Resources used when developing plans for PEF



Perceived impact of PEF

- 6.8. This year's survey included several new questions which sought to further improve understanding of the specific impact of the Pupil Equity Fund, in addition to the impact of ASF support as a whole. These questions were only asked of those in receipt of PEF funding **and** Challenge Authority or Schools Programme support, and focused on how PEF has been used alongside other ASF support, and the perceived impact of PEF in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 6.9. Most survey respondents in receipt of PEF funding and CA/SP support indicated that they used at least some of their PEF funding to support approaches that were distinct from CA/SP approaches; 80% indicated this, including 19% who used all of their PEF funding to support distinct approaches. This finding was similar across key respondent groups.

Figure 24: How used PEF alongside Challenge Authority/Schools Programme support

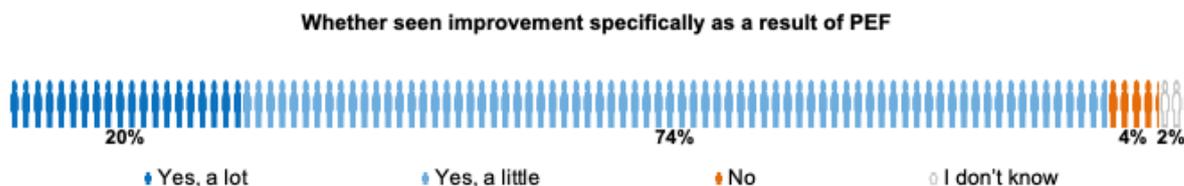


Note: Only asked of schools in receipt of PEF and CA/SP

- 6.10. Headteachers who had used their PEF allocation to fund distinct approaches indicated that these were typically focused on providing additional wellbeing support. This included initiatives to tackle poverty, and joint approaches with third sector organisations focused in mental health needs. A substantial number also indicated that their PEF allocation had been used to support distinct attainment-focused initiatives, including some with a specific focus on literacy attainment and supporting pupils with dyslexia. Others had used PEF to support wider pedagogy developments and improved teaching and learning, or to provide additional staffing capacity.
- 6.11. The survey also asked schools in receipt of PEF funding alongside Challenge Authority or Schools Programme support for their views on any improvement in closing the poverty-related gap specifically as a result of their use of PEF. This was in addition to their views on the overall impact of ASF in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, as reported at Figure 17.

6.12. The great majority (94%) of those in receipt of PEF and CA/SP support reported seeing an improvement **specifically as a result of their PEF funding**. This included 20% who had seen ‘a lot’ of improvement to date as a result of their PEF funding.

Figure 25: Perceived improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment specifically as a result of PEF



Note: Only asked of schools in receipt of PEF **and** CA/SP

6.13. The above findings suggest that headteachers in receipt of PEF and CA/SP support were more positive about the impact of PEF funding specifically, than about the impact of ASF support as a whole. For example, the 94% of those in receipt of PEF and CA/SP who had seen improvement specifically as a result of PEF compares with the 87% of all respondents who have seen improvement as a result of ASF support.¹⁰

¹⁰ Schools in receipt of PEF **and** CA/SP support were asked separately about the impact of PEF funding specifically, and about the impact of the ASF support they receive as a whole. As such these schools are included in the 87% of all respondents who have seen improvement as a result of ASF support (and in the 94% who have seen improvement specifically as a result of PEF).

7. Learning from COVID-19

- 7.1. Around 350 respondents (58%) provided comment on what they felt had been the main challenges to closing the poverty-related attainment gap as a result of COVID-19 during 2020/21. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 13.
- 7.2. This shows some commonality with the 2020 survey in the issues raised by schools, including for example the focus on face-to-face contact, remote learning, and pupil/family wellbeing. However, responses also show some change since the 2020.
- 7.3. Most notably, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of schools referring to staffing capacity and absences (moving from the fifth most common issue in 2020, to the second this year), and to pupil attendance (from the least commonly mentioned issue in 2020, to the fourth this year). Other issues were less commonly mentioned by schools; for example, fewer schools referred to challenges with remote learning or digital connectivity this year. This is consistent with findings reported earlier (see Table 4), indicating that schools have refined their approach to remote learning, and there has been some improvement in digital skills and connectivity.
- 7.4. It is also notable that, while the survey asked about challenges across the year as a whole, some of the issues raised by schools are likely to have applied specifically to the period of school building closures. For example, comments around the lack of face-to-face contact with pupils were raised primarily in relation to school building closures, although some also referred to ongoing use of remote learning as a result of increased pupil absences.

Table 13: Main challenges as a result of COVID-19 and school building closures (n=349)

Lack of face-to-face contact, difficulties engaging pupils and families, especially the most vulnerable/disadvantaged	42%
Staffing capacity, inc absence/self-isolation, challenges securing cover	42%
Challenges for parents/families supporting pupils during remote learning and return to school buildings	38%
Pupil attendance, including COVID-19 anxiety from parents/families	26%
Pupil/family wellbeing and safety, resilience, mental health (including difficulty responding to the increasing volume of need)	23%
Difficulty adjusting to remote learning, adapting approaches	12%
Digital connectivity and literacy – for pupils, families, staff	11%
Staff morale, wellbeing and mental health, risk assessments	11%
Access to external support services	9%
Impact of poverty and deprivation (food, fuel, clothing, space to work, etc)	9%
Challenges for pupils returning to school building, lost skills/motivation	9%
Accessing resources, procurement	6%
Limited staff collaboration, difficulty delivering skills development/training	4%
Measuring impact and attainment	4%

- 7.5. The **lack of face-to-face contact** was amongst the most commonly cited challenge. This was typically raised specifically in relation to the period of school building closures (January to March 2021), although some also highlighted that increased pupil absence since the re-opening of school buildings had resulted in an increased number of pupils relying on remote learning. These schools suggested that limited in-person contact continued to have an adverse effect on engagement with pupils and families. This was highlighted as a particular issue for the most vulnerable families - including those in the most deprived areas and those hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main challenge has undoubtedly been the remoteness of engagement. We have continued to find ways to build and strengthen partnerships, but it is not the same when you cannot engage face-to-face. The lack of face-to-face was also felt when it came to the children's learning. Families were fully supported to engage in learning at home, but the close support provided in school, often done so responsively, was not possible for periods of time.
(Schools Programme school in rural area)

The most deprived learners suffered most as a result of lockdown. Not having daily in person contact with school meant that they have fallen further behind their more affluent peers who engaged much better with online learning. Being able to motivate those pupils and families remotely was challenging. Creating space and time for pupils to share their lockdown experiences and deal with any resultant stress or anxiety has been challenging. This will have a lasting impact on this cohort and we will be dealing with this for years.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

- 7.6. **Staffing capacity** was also cited by a substantial proportion of respondents as a key challenge linked to COVID-19 and school building closures. This reflected a view that teachers and other staff have been key in delivering effective support and targeted interventions during the pandemic (and especially during school building closures). Respondents referred to the role of staff in delivering these interventions, including for example development of digital resources to support absent pupils, delivery of targeted small group learning and support, and nurture-based and other approaches focused on pupil health and wellbeing. Some indicated that interventions had required teaching staff to deliver more specialist support to pupils and families.

Staffing challenges have a significant impact as planned interventions are not always able to take place when staff need to cover in other areas. We often have to support wellbeing as some of our young people experience challenges in this area. We obviously value the importance of this, but it can sometimes mean that interventions which had been planned to target aspects of literacy and numeracy need to have a different focus.
(PEF-only school in rural area)

There has not been a day when we have not had to amend our staffing due to self-isolating, awaiting PCR results, impact of COVID-19 upon childcare and caring commitments. Accessing teaching supply has been a huge pressure and then adapting the day when supply has not been available. We have worked incredibly hard to ensure continuity of learning and relationship for our children - but this has been a tremendous cost to the wellbeing of staff in terms of lack of continuity, taking on additional needs and the uncertainty of what the following day may bring.
(PEF-only school in a small town)

- 7.7. **Challenges for parents and families supporting pupils** were also highlighted by a substantial number of headteachers. This included particular difficulties for families with limited digital connectivity or literacy, and challenges for parents supporting multiple children at different stages of the curriculum. Some also noted the increasing number of families affected by poverty, and suggested that financial and other pressures on families could limit their capacity to support pupils in remote learning.

The second lockdown was difficult for parents - although we supported them really well, many children suffered due to the lack of parental support. This was due to digital challenges, parents having to work from home themselves and children not having the same routines as they would have had if they had been at school.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

Parental and pupil engagement during lockdown - it has been difficult to re-establish those good working relationships with all parents and carers. Feel as if we have a rebuilding job to do with this.
(PEF-only school in a small town)

- 7.8. **Pupil attendance and anxiety around return to school** was cited as a major challenge for some schools. This included reference to the difficulties noted above in maintaining engagement in the curriculum with limited face-to-face contact, and to challenges in ensuring online learning can be supported by families at home. Headteachers also referred to anxiety around returning to school as contributing to pupil absence, and to a loss of resilience amongst pupils and families on return to school. These schools had to change the focus of interventions to re-build the resilience, positive attitudes and aspirations lost during the pandemic, to support pupil engagement in the curriculum. It is also notable that the theme of pupil engagement is evident across other challenges mentioned by schools, for example around engagement during remote learning.

Child (or parent) anxieties/reduced access to face-to-face teaching/support - setting lessons that challenged children academically whilst making tasks manageable for parents (re time, IT skills) has been a challenge. Pupil (and parent) resilience has been low on return to school. We have had to re-visit school values and to re-establish positive mindsets and to encourage a good work ethic.
(PEF-only school in urban area)

7.9. Headteachers also referred to **concerns for the wellbeing and safety of some pupils and families**. This included reports of increases in need for support with mental health and/or emotional wellbeing, for pupils and families. Some schools had faced significant challenges in ensuring pupils and families had access to the full range of support they required, in the context of restrictions and pressures on partner agencies.

The main challenges have been, and will continue to be, sustaining wellbeing so that children have the emotional resilience and head space to learn. The escalation in distressed behaviours and levels of anxiety has been very clear. Mental health has been a real issue for a lot of our parents and children, as have anxiety around food poverty and the cost of the school day. All of this needs to be addressed before we have children feeling safe, and in a place where they can engage in learning.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

7.10. Around a quarter of respondents provided comment in relation to how they had responded to the challenges of COVID-19 and school building closures, and in particular any creative solutions they wished to share. The main points raised by respondents are summarised at Table 14.

Table 14: Creative responses to the challenges of COVID-19 and school building closures (n=137)

Specific wellbeing-focused approaches and tools (including addressing the socio-economic impact of the pandemic)	40%
Adapting approaches to teaching and learning in light of experience, including use of digital resources, outdoor learning	36%
Maintaining communication, building relationships, pastoral care to pupils/families – including use of specific tools/resources	28%
Additional staffing capacity, staff skills and development	19%
Staff commitment, collaborative working, etc.	18%
Targeting/ engaging with specific groups, most vulnerable pupils/families	17%
Strengthening the school community, including ensuring a shared ethos and commitment (to equity and education more widely)	16%
Work with external services and community groups to provide additional support	10%
Building pupil and family skills/capacity, including digital literacy	9%
Supporting return to school buildings	6%

7.11. Respondents referred to a range of **approaches and tools with a focus on pupil and family wellbeing**, including some noting the extent to which wellbeing and mental health needs can be a barrier to progress. Specific approaches identified as having been effective included shared reading, family quizzes and other activities, and regular challenge activities. Some also noted the value of these approaches in fostering a sense of community amongst families, for example through sharing of photographs and experiences.

A Change and Loss programme across the whole school was followed by identification of children who require further support with options for yoga, mindfulness sessions, massage in schools programme and drawing & talking therapy - before looking at counselling service, educational psychology and school nurse support. Children have the choice as to what suits them and what they find useful strategies when working in these smaller groups.
(PEF-only school in small town)

7.12. A substantial number of schools also referred to having **used their experience of the pandemic to adapt learning and teaching approaches**. These schools referred to increasing use of specific digital resources to support remote learning and recovery, outdoor learning on return to school, and more widely to use of resources to support further development of staff skills and capacity.

We established a hub for vulnerable pupils and those with ASN during the second lockdown. The impact of small group work, consistency of staff and no movement from class to class had a positive impact on attendance, anxiety, incidents of pupils unable to cope, and family relationships. This evidence has changed our approaches to supporting pupils with ASD this session.
(PEF-only school in urban area)

Our approach to outdoor learning in conjunction with our nurturing approaches and values has had a significant impact on pupils' relationships, wellbeing, readiness to learn, resilience, risk taking, problem solving, conflict resolution etc. This in turn has impacted positively on their attainment and achievements.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

- 7.13. Approaches to **maintain communication and build relationships with pupils and families** were also commonly mentioned. This included reference to continued use of new technologies and tools introduced during the first period of school building closures.

We feel our communication with parents is better. We were more responsive to parent and pupil needs and adapted quickly - i.e. no-screen Wellness Wednesdays in response to parent/pupil feedback, with staff setting up a school grid of activities. We also built more trusting relationships with some of our FME¹¹ families through more communication and quality conversations.
(PEF-only school in rural area)

- 7.14. Effective communication with pupils and families were also seen as crucial in maintaining a strong school ethos, even as school buildings remained closed. This included some who had seen a deterioration in the sense of school community during school building closures – these schools had included a specific focus on rebuilding their ethos on the return to school.

Our team have worked really hard to develop an inclusive ethos based around strong relationships with young people and families. We use nurturing practices and restorative approaches to ensure all young people are included and heard - this is really paying off in terms of engagement and wellbeing in the school.
(Challenge Authority school in urban area)

- 7.15. It was also suggested that regular communication with pupils and families, and the associated improved understanding of their circumstances and needs, had been crucial in maintaining pupil engagement. This included enabling schools to respond more effectively to pupils support needs, during school building closures and on return to school.

- 7.16. The role of pupil and family engagement as part of schools' response to the pandemic was also evident across other points raised by headteachers. For example, pupil engagement was also a key element in schools' use of wellbeing-focused approaches and tools, targeting of specific vulnerable groups, strengthening the school community, and building pupil and family capacity.

This time broke down so many previous barriers. Our understanding of each other, the community we are in and the needs of our pupils has strengthened. The level of empathy and nurture across our staff and within our children which was already very high has gone stellar

¹¹ The category 'FME' refers to those learners whose record in SEEMiS, the national database, showed that they were registered for Free School Meals.

in spite of how very tired everyone is. Our resilience, creativity and confidence in our abilities has grown.
(PEF-only school in rural area)

8. Concluding remarks

- 8.1. This report has presented findings from a recent survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of support from the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The ASF supports the Scottish Attainment Challenge focus on improving literacy, numeracy, health and well-being of children adversely affected by poverty, and incorporates a number of specific strands to support schools to close the poverty-related gap in attainment and wellbeing.
- 8.2. As the fifth survey of headteachers, a 25% response rate remains positive in the context of survey fieldwork being undertaken during a period of continuing pressure on schools, including during school building closures. Most importantly, the volume of responses is sufficient to produce robust results, and survey weighting has minimised the impact of any response bias.
- 8.3. Findings continue to demonstrate positive impacts being delivered with ASF support. For example, most respondents feel that ASF support has helped to develop data and evaluation skills, have seen an increase in collaborative working across their school as a result of ASF support, and feel that PEF has provided additional resource needed to address the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 8.4. A large majority of respondents also reported seeing an improvement in closing the poverty-related gap during 2020/21 as a result of ASF supported approaches. While this is a positive finding, it is notable that views expressed through the survey are not wholly consistent with published attainment data. For example, the latest Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Level data shows a reduction in the proportion of primary school pupils achieving expected CfE levels in literacy and numeracy over the COVID-19 pandemic period (between 2018/19 and 2020/21).¹² This is discussed further in the ASF evaluation year 6 report.
- 8.5. Written comments from several survey respondents noted that their school did not yet have clear evidence on how the pandemic had impacted their attainment gap, while others referred to ASF-supported approaches as having minimised the adverse impact of the pandemic (and in this way, having a positive impact). However, the survey does not provide clear data on the reason(s) for any disconnect between the perceived impact on the poverty-related attainment gap, and published attainment data.

¹² The Scottish Government did not collect Achievement of CfE Levels data for any pupils in 2019/20, and only for primary school pupils in 2020/21. For more information the publication can be found by clicking on the [link](#).

- 8.6. Development of the survey evidence base over time also shows several positive trends. For example, the 94% who expect further improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the next few years represents a 6-point improvement on 2020. Similarly, the 65% who expect the focus on equity to be sustainable represents a 17-point improvement on 2019.
- 8.7. However, survey findings also make clear that schools have faced significant challenges during 2020/21. This is reflected in the 95% of survey respondents indicating that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap – and 54% had seen a ‘significant impact’. This is consistent with the range of challenges highlighted by respondents this year, including during school building closures. These challenges included a lack of face-to-face contact with pupils (primarily during school building closures, but also reflecting ongoing increases in pupil absence), staffing capacity in light of increased absences and difficulties securing cover, challenges supporting pupil and family wellbeing, and the impact of the pandemic on pupils’ and families’ mental health.
- 8.8. Concerns were also expressed around the sustainability of progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. While more than half expected progress to be sustainable to some extent, there remained concerns regarding potential loss of staff resources without ASF funding and uncertainty around the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the poverty-related attainment gap.

Key themes

- 8.9. A number of key themes emerged across survey findings, which appear to have a particularly important bearing on schools’ experience of closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and have been reflected in their response to challenges during 2020/21.
- 8.10. These themes include specific factors that appear linked to progress achieved to date in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Survey findings indicate that the headteachers most likely to report improvement were those:
- who had **tailored their use of ASF support** based on their understanding of local needs;
 - who had embedded approaches to equity across the school;
 - who felt their use of data and evidence was strong; and
 - who had **engaged effectively with families and communities** as part of their wider approach to achieving equity – although it is notable that survey results show a small decrease in the proportion of schools using family and community engagement.

- 8.11. Survey findings also show some change in the factors linked to progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Use of ASF support to meet local needs was a new question for 2021, while use of data was identified as significant for the first time. The relative importance of engagement with families and communities also increased from the previous survey.
- 8.12. Several wider themes were also evident across the survey, which had emerged in the specific context of ongoing challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures. Again, these appear to have influenced schools' experience of ASF and their work to close the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 8.13. **Supporting pupil and family wellbeing** has been especially important in response to increasing numbers of pupils, families and staff with mental health and wellbeing needs. In this context, headteachers reported increasing numbers of families looking to schools for support, in some cases requiring staff to provide more specialist support that would be beyond the usual remit of their role. The importance of pupil and family wellbeing is also reflected in comments highlighting wellbeing as a potential barrier to recovery from the impacts of the pandemic, with some schools indicating that an initial focus on supporting wellbeing had been necessary to enable pupils to fully engage with recovering their learning.
- 8.14. **Refining approaches to equity in light of experience of the pandemic** has been evident in the number of schools drawing on their experience of the first year of the pandemic, and in particular the first period of school building closures. This experience has been used most obviously in schools continuing to develop their remote learning approaches and resources, but has also helped schools in adapting approaches to support pupils' return to school, and further development of staff skills and capacity.
- 8.15. **Better understanding of the challenges affecting pupils and families** has continued to develop through schools building **closer relationships with families and the community**. While there has been a fall in the number of schools reporting increased collaboration with families and communities, a large majority of respondents reported a continuing focus on pupil and family engagement as part of their approach to equity. This engagement has supported a wider focus on pupil and family wellbeing for some schools, and for others has contributed to a better understanding of pupil and family needs to support work to rebuild resilience across the school community.

- 8.16. **Ensuring a shared ethos and values across the school community** continues to be a key focus for schools as part of their work to recover from the impact of the pandemic. Some reported a deterioration in the sense of community during school building closures, and have worked to rebuild their shared ethos through effective communication and engagement with pupils and families.
- 8.17. These themes were highlighted by headteachers in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures. However, survey responses indicate that they will continue to inform work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, with written comments providing examples of schools continuing to work towards recovery from COVID-19.

Annex 1: Acronyms used

ASF	Attainment Scotland Fund
ASN	Additional Support Needs
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CA	Challenge Authority
PEF	Pupil Equity Fund
SAC	Scottish Attainment Challenge
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SP	Schools Programme



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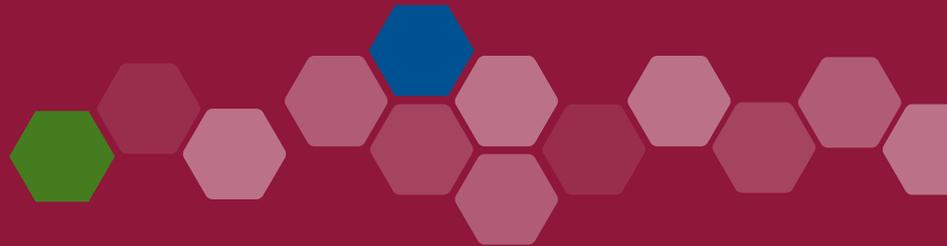
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