Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation: Process Evaluation - Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads Survey Report, 2022/23

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Contents

Introduction

As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge refresh, launched in March 2022, and the new Mission *'to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap to deliver on the Scottish Government's vision of equity and excellence in education'*, a revised evaluation strategy was developed for the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF).

This report is one of the outputs of the first year analytical plan for the new ASF Evaluation Strategy, and forms part of the reporting under the process evaluation strand. Specifically, it reports on data gathered through a survey of Scottish Attainment Challenge local authority leads undertaken in the first year of the evaluation to gain an understanding at national, regional and local level of the processes and early implementation of the refreshed Attainment Scotland Fund in 2022/23.

Methodology

This Report contains analysis of the responses to a survey of local authority Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) leads.[1] The Survey of Local Authority Scottish Attainment Challenge Leads was issued on 11 May and closed on 12 June 2023 and received 19 responses from across the 32 local authorities, which constitutes a 59% response rate. Survey methodology was utilised because it is a key investigation tool which can collect nuanced feedback and opinions, reported anonymously which when analysed results in key insights and learning for the ASF process evaluation strand.

Responses include seven responses from previous Challenge Authorities, five responses from local authorities previously in receipt of Schools Programme funding and seven local authorities previously in receipt of PEF only.

In previous years of the ASF evaluation, local authority views were sought via the Local Authority Survey which was circulated to Directors of Education. This survey achieved between 15 (46%) and 28 (87%) responses from across the 32 local authorities. Attainment Scotland Fund Local Authority survey data gathered during 2015 to 2021 was not published as standalone reports, but rather contributed to the annual ASF evaluation reports which brought together data from a range of sources.

The analysis was undertaken using Excel, and utilised the funding stream previously received by the local authority as a key categorisation, namely former

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[1] Local authority Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) Leads are local government officers in a lead role supporting strategic planning for the Challenge.

Challenge Authority local authorities, former local authorities in receipt of Schools Programme funding, and local authorities formerly in receipt of PEF-only.

Findings

The reporting addresses a number of themes linked to the evaluation questions developed for the revised evaluation strategy.

Governance and support

What worked well and what could be improved in the national and local governance and support with implementation of the refreshed Attainment Scotland Fund?

Survey findings were broadly positive regarding the governance and support received in relation to the refreshed Attainment Scotland Fund in 2022/23:

- The Attainment Advisor (AA) role was highly valued in providing support and challenge to local authorities and to individual schools, and as link/conduit/single point of contact. The consistency of AA support was highlighted as key, as was AA awareness of local context and circumstances.

- Wider support from Education Scotland was broadly valued, including networking meetings, drop-in sessions, access to national guidance and best practice, with the Equity Toolkit and resources on the National Improvement Hub highlighted, alongside the support from Senior Regional Advisors (SRAs). However, there was some evidence of inconsistency and variability of support and a number of improvement suggestions highlighted.

- Views on the role of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) were mostly positive, with examples of active engagement and close collaboration with RICs including sharing good practice, local knowledge and peer support. However, some variability of experience was also raised by some respondents, such as the scope for improved co-ordination of work across RIC partners and closer alignment between RICs and practitioners. The potential for duplication of activities was also flagged.

- Perspectives from respondents in terms of governance and support from Scottish Government, including provision of the framework and guidance, were also broadly positive. However, less positive aspects were also raised by some respondents, such as the process of setting stretch aims, the need for increased clarity related to stretch aims, and delays to the issuing of updated guidance which was viewed to have negatively impacted planning at the local level.

Funding

What funding was allocated through the Scottish Attainment Challenge Refreshed Attainment Scotland Fund to schools and local authorities, to what extent was it used within funds requirements and/or supplemented with other funding sources? What were stakeholders views on the implementation of the new funding structure introduced with the Scottish Attainment Challenge refresh?

- The great majority of survey respondents viewed ASF as providing additionality. Perceptions of ASF additionality for former Challenge Authority local authorities related, for example, to a focus on additional staff and targeting of resources on pupils impacted by poverty, and additionality provided at each funding stream.

- The opportunity for creative approaches and broadening of targeting linked to need were highlighted by former Schools Programme local authorities who viewed ASF as additional to a great extent, with the opportunity to extend central team support further to schools and additionality in terms of roles funded, such as family link workers.

- All former PEF-only local authorities viewed ASF as additional to a great extent, with respondents highlighting a broad range of new posts created as a result of introduction of SEF, as well as newly created services and services developed with a more robust focus on children impacted by poverty.

- The great majority of respondents indicated the use of core or other funding towards the Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission, with responses highlighting a range of ways in which local authorities utilised core funding, or more broadly the local authority's focus on the Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission rather than just the funding. Core funding was used to complement or supplement ASF, such as extending the reach of initiatives or staffing in line with the strategic approach.

- The Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission was perceived as an important factor in providing a local authority wide focus to addressing the poverty-related attainment gap and collaboration in support of this.

Implementation

How did local authorities implement the Strategic Equity Fund alongside Pupil Equity Fund and Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund?

The survey sought to generate insights into the experience of local authorities in implementation of the different strands of the Attainment Scotland Fund in the first year of its operation under the revised Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission, and to develop understanding of the differential experience of local authorities based on their former status with regard to receipt of Challenge Authority, Schools Programme, and Pupil Equity Funding.

Implementation of Strategic Equity Funding (SEF)

There was a specific focus on the implementation of Strategic Equity Funding (SEF), a new strategic element of Attainment Scotland Funding provided to each of the thirty-two local authorities in Scotland[2] introduced as a key element of the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge.

- Respondents were broadly positive about the strategic approach enabled through SEF although this differed to some extent depending on individual local authority former funding status under ASF prior to its refresh.

- In terms of what was perceived as working well with implementation of SEF, former Challenge Authority local authority respondents highlighted the potential for improved longer-term planning through the introduction of the SAC Logic Model linking the national to the local authority level, budgets linked to academic sessions, and improved modelling and planning, linked to sustainability, as well as a reduction of bureaucracy (eg in financial reporting).

- Local authorities previously in receipt of Schools Programme funding highlighted perceptions of more equitable distribution of funding and the involvement of all local authorities, the opportunity to respond to local need, enhanced reach and increased opportunities to support children and young people most in need.

- Previous PEF-only local authorities were very positive overall regarding the funding model for SEF, highlighting its inclusion of all local authorities, and the associated recognition of the impact of poverty across local authorities, as

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[2] Prior to the Scottish Attainment Challenge refresh in March 2022, Attainment Scotland Funding was distributed via Challenge Authority funding to nine local authorities, Schools Programme funding to 74 schools across twelve local authorities, and via Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) distributed directly to schools. Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) replaced Challenge Authority funding and Schools Programme funding for the 2022/23 session, providing funding to each of the thirty-two local authorities. See Pupil attainment: closing the gap - Schools - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) for further information.

well as the strategic nature of SEF. The four year timescale for SEF was also broadly welcomed.

- The negative financial impact of the introduction of SEF on former Challenge Authorities was highlighted by several respondents of former Challenge Authorities, describing for example the negative impact on what could be taken forward within the local authority due to reduced funding under SEF, and perceptions of the increasing effect over time due to the tapering of funding.

- A number of aspects for improvement were also suggested related to implementation of SEF. This included earlier issue of guidance (such as PEF), and a need for further flexibility to support in-year decision-making. Several specific suggestions for improvements to the stretch aims process were also noted, including more guidance and improved clarity.

Planning for strategic use of ASF (SEF, PEF and CECYP)

- A range of local authority structures and governance arrangements were in place to support ASF funding streams, with new and existing posts, and new and existing structures for SEF, PEF and CECYP.

- There were themes both of continuity as well as change in terms of planning for strategic use of ASF.

- A key theme in former Challenge Authority local authority responses was continuity of the existing direction (eg *'six years into the SAC journey'*) with governance arrangements and central teams already in place.

- Continuation was also a theme for previous Schools Programme local authorities, highlighting continuation from Schools Programme as a factor in planning for SEF, as well as the increased use of data and increased consultation with a range of stakeholders. The establishment of planning groups to support the new policy at local authority level were also highlighted by former Schools Programme local authorities.

- For former PEF-only local authorities, a range of aspects to support planning for the strategic use of ASF were highlighted, including collaborative approaches such as Participatory Budgeting, stakeholder engagement and creation of key posts to support collaborative working.

Development of Stretch Aims 2022/23

The requirement for local authorities to set ambitious, achievable stretch aims for progress in overall attainment and towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap was introduced as a requirement of the Scottish Attainment Challenge [Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#).

- Two aspects were highlighted across responses in terms of how local authorities had developed their stretch aims in 2022/23, namely the role of data and the role of stakeholders. In terms of stakeholders, respondents indicated central local authority staff, headteachers, and Education Scotland were involved to a greater extent than stakeholders including pupils, parents and carers, third sector organisations/partners, families and communities, RICs or elected members.

- Factors identified as impacting on stakeholder engagement in developing stretch aims included the timescales for the development of Stretch Aims were viewed as having limited consultation with a wider range of stakeholders. This was particularly viewed to have limited consultation with parents, pupils and families/communities. An intention to broaden the engagement of stakeholders in the development of stretch aims in future years was noted by several respondents. There were also challenges associated with it being a new approach, with the availability of relevant data noted.

Planning and implementing the use of ASF: what worked well in local authorities in 2022/23 and what could be improved

In terms of what had worked well in local authorities in planning and implementing the use of ASF in 2022/23, three themes emerged from SAC Leads responses:

- Continuity and change: building on what was in place previously, existing plans and partnerships, as well as focusing on refreshed approaches and associated benefits. Continuity was particularly key within former Challenge Authority local authority responses but was also a theme within some previous Schools Programme local authority responses where there was evidence of building on PEF and CECYP planning and implementation approaches as well as the opportunity through SEF to increase the scale, speed and depth of approaches.
- Collaboration: strong collaboration and partnership working; and,
- Use of data: effective use of and interrogation of data, data improving decision-making and ensuring targeting of resources to greatest need.

In terms of areas for improvement, the need for wider stakeholder engagement was a theme across respondents, particularly in terms of the need for improvements in engagement of children and young people in planning processes. Time factors

were also highlighted, with some perceiving there had been constricted timescales for planning. Further improvements were perceived to be required in terms of measurement of impact by several respondents. Addressing challenges related to staffing and to underspend were also highlighted, as was the need for planning for sustainability as funding reduces, as highlighted by a few respondents.

Approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap

How do the approaches for equity support pupils (and parents/carers) from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds?

All SAC Leads who responded to the survey indicated there had been a change in their local authority approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap in 2022/23.

- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on families; and the ongoing impact of COVID-19, such as impact on attendance, was a common theme influencing local authorities' approaches irrespective of former ASF funding status. Other aspects related to approaches were more differentiated depending on former ASF funding status.

- Former Challenge Authority local authority respondents pointed to an emphasis on continuing with workstreams despite reduced funding to the local authority under SEF as opposed to through Challenge Authority funding.

- A considerable change in approach for those schools previously in receipt of Schools Programme funding was highlighted, resulting from the withdrawal of Schools Programme funding at the school level and the introduction of SEF at the local authority level. Respondents from local authorities previously in receipt of Schools Programme funding referenced the local authority level funding as enabling a strategic approach and support across authorities, a more focused approach and a mechanism to ensure effective targeting.

- For former PEF-only local authorities, SEF was viewed as providing a central resource in addition to PEF at school level, and enabling the development of strategies. Forward planning with a broadening range of interventions was evidenced, alongside the utilisation of resources such as Education Scotland's Equity Toolkit, and the National Improvement Hub.

Pupil Equity Funding (PEF)

- Local authorities reported established and routine support as well as specific/bespoke support provided by local authorities to support schools effectively and fully invest PEF. There was evidence gathered of embedded

processes, further developments and increased intensity of support, such as through newly created processes and newly appointed posts.

- What works well in terms of local authority support to schools was similarly broad-ranging, including structures and processes, through standardised reporting linked to school improvement planning and through relevant post-holders, to support linkage between central level and schools and encourage collaboration with relevant local authority services such as providing links to finance and HR support. Templates and monitoring tools including new tools were frequently highlighted and the role of tools in supporting improved analysis was referenced.

- Networks to support collaboration were a further element of support viewed across respondents as working well, and included examples such as equity networks, PEF networks, and headteacher conferences. Achieving a balance between school autonomy and local authority support and challenge, and of both standardised/routine and bespoke support was evident in responses.

- There were a range of views of where local authority support to schools in planning for and use of PEF could be improved, including related to spending/financial review, increased focus on learner voice and enhanced capacity for use of data and reduction of underspend at the school level. Across former PEF-only local authority respondents there were a number of suggestions for improvement, including improved planning and reporting, more timely introduction of guidance from Scottish Government to enable local authorities to support schools with planning, further improvements in the use of data, support with financial planning, sharing of good practice and continued developments in terms of new tools for monitoring and evaluation.

- Factors highlighted by respondents related to how they perceived schools in their local authority had invested PEF in 2022/23 included the robust use of data and evidence to support decision-making on spend, the importance of effective targeting and the investment of PEF based on local needs. Whilst broadly positive, there was recognition where this could be improved, with variability amongst schools in terms of the effectiveness of their investment recognised, pointing to some schools being in need of additional support and others of more focused support. The need for wider consultation with learners and parents, as well as a continued need for support and advice around tracking impact of interventions, were also raised.

- The majority of local authority respondents were of the view that there is sufficient support for local authorities and schools to effectively and fully invest their PEF. A number of specific recommendations for further support were raised by individual respondents, including the need for further relevant examples particularly regarding PEF in rural settings, provision of standardised tools for local authorities, timely guidance produced by Scottish

Government, and the need for increased accountability for PEF similar to those put in place for SEF.

- Reporting arrangements for schools to report on their PEF plans were broadly viewed as sufficient. Standards and Quality (S&Q) reporting was largely viewed as an established and appropriate route and one which minimises bureaucracy, as well as importantly utilising existing planning and reporting. Alongside this, AA reporting via Tri-annual Reporting was raised as a positive, and there were examples of bespoke PEF reporting mechanisms created at local authority level.

Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund (CECYP)

- The CECYP Fund was viewed to have supported strategic decision-making to improve attainment or outcomes for care experienced children and young people within respondent local authorities. Collaboration, joint planning, and partnerships were highlighted in all responses.

- Dedicated postholders such as Virtual Headteacher/Virtual School was highlighted in particular as a way which is supporting joint working and supporting capacity building. A recognition of the shared responsibility between heads of social work and education for CECYP was seen as key, as well as the importance of alignment of CECYP with related strategic priorities relating to care experienced children and young people such as The Promise.

- Aspects which could be improved in working collaboratively across services including social work to plan and implement the CECYP were also raised. Further improvements in collaboration, work to minimise potential duplication, ensuring training for all stakeholders in terms of available supports for care experienced children and young people and their families, and a further focus on evaluation of approaches and evidencing impact of the CECYP Fund were all suggestions made.

Monitoring and evaluation

How are schools and local authorities monitoring, refining and evaluating their approaches to address the poverty-related attainment gap?

The survey sought to develop understanding of the types of monitoring and evaluation approaches and activities which are being undertaken at local authority level both in monitoring and evaluating approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap and in supporting schools to undertake such activity.

- Descriptions of local authority approaches to monitoring and evaluating were provided across local authority respondent groupings. This included effective scrutiny through established forums/scrutiny structures and use of data and evidence, including the use of data on tracking interventions, and of central postholders with responsibility for monitoring and evaluation. Linkages between data and evidence plus scrutiny/oversight were also raised as important. There was more evidence of scrutiny structures in place in former Challenge Authorities than was the case for local authorities who were not previously Challenge Authorities.

- A range of approaches to support schools to monitor and evaluate approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap were also described. This included both generic approaches, such as school improvement support and challenge visits, data support and data discussions, professional dialogue between SAC Lead, AA and headteachers, and specific approaches including specific tools to support schools such as bespoke local authority dashboards and monitoring/tracking toolkits.

Conclusions

The Scottish Attainment Challenge local authority leads survey has sought to develop understanding of the processes and early implementation of the refreshed Attainment Scotland Fund in 2022/23.

Overall, the evidence suggests that in the first year of implementation there has been considerable progress towards embedding the new ASF funding model introduced with the Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission. The experiences of local authorities in planning for and implementing Strategic Equity Funding are in part differentiated on the basis of the type of ASF funding that local authorities received prior to the Scottish Attainment Challenge refresh.

Whilst there were some perceptions of negative financial impact of introduction of SEF on former Challenge Authorities, the new approach introduced with the SAC refresh of providing funding to each local authority through Strategic Equity Funding has been broadly welcomed, alongside the recognition that poverty impacts the educational experiences of children and young people across all local authorities. SEF has also supported more strategic, longer-term planning across local authorities, and this is particularly the case for local authorities who were not previously Challenge Authorities. The introduction of the SAC Logic Model has been supportive of such strategic and longer-term planning. Additionally, the SAC Mission has provided a cohesive mechanism to support a focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap at the local authority level.

There is evidence of ongoing refinement and development of approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, not least due to the ongoing impact of COVID-19, and the impact of the cost of living crisis.

There is evidence both of continuity and of change in the experiences of local authorities as a result of introduction of the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge. Key continuity aspects include the importance of collaboration, and the use of data and evidence. There was strong evidence of collaboration, but experiences of collaboration were not uniform, with various approaches to collaboration at different levels and across the different funding streams. Similarly, there is evidence of increased use of data and evidence, but this is still evolving with variations across local authorities. In particular, measuring impact remains an area for further improvement.

The role of Attainment Advisors in providing support and challenge to local authorities and to schools is clearly highly valued, with the conduit to wider Education Scotland expertise and resources an important aspect of this provision.

Learning has emerged of what has worked well and what can be improved in terms of implementation. Time pressures and pressures of other demands have been highlighted, with tight timescales and delays e.g. to key guidance viewed as impacting negatively in some instances. The importance of engaging a wider range

of stakeholders has also emerged strongly. For example, in terms of the development of stretch aims, much of the stakeholder engagement related to central local authority officials, Attainment Advisors and headteachers. Tight timescales for the development of stretch aims were perceived to have limited some engagement/consultation with specific groups of stakeholders, and there is recognition of the need for increased consultation and engagement with learners, parents and families in particular in relation to stretch aims.

In terms of PEF, whilst there was evidence of improved understanding on PEF spend, a greater focus on impact and on review and scrutiny; perceptions of variability at the school level remain. Whilst schools know their own contexts and what is needed, there is a recognised need for further support for some schools in terms of PEF, particularly around tracking of impact.

In terms of CECYP, the importance of collaboration and partnerships has been highlighted, with designated posts such as the Virtual Headteacher role viewed as highly valuable in supporting and developing such collaborative and partnership working.

The combination of effective use of data combined with strong collaboration across services and partners, and engagement of stakeholders from pupils up to elected members, to enable highly effective planning regarding targeting of resources has also emerged as a key learning point.

Whilst the evidence suggests that in the first year of implementation there has been considerable progress towards embedding the new ASF funding model introduced with the Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission, there is learning emerging which can support the continual improvement of the implementation of the fund. In the period between responses to the survey and publication of this report, further progress will have been made by local authorities in terms of reporting on stretch aims, collaborating on and refining stretch aims, and further developing structures and processes to support progress in each local authority area.

This report is an initial key output from the new ASF Evaluation Strategy and forms part of the overall body of evidence developed over the course of 2022/23 and into future years of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Summary reporting is scheduled for Year 3 (2024/25), which will triangulate evidence from this survey and development work on assessing impact as well as the thematic areas work strands.
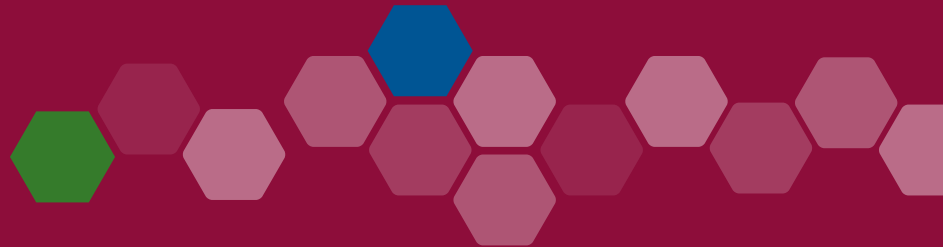
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