

Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation - Thematic Evaluation Summary Report, 2024



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation – Thematic Evaluation Summary Report

This report provides a summary of the three thematic aspects of evaluation carried out in Year 1 of the new Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation. It provides an introduction to the Thematic Evaluation strand, a summary of the three thematic areas and a concluding section that looks to bring together the interconnections and cross cutting themes.

The Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF)

The Scottish Attainment Challenge's (SAC) Mission is to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. It is supported by the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF), which aims to deliver improvements in Scotland's schools in literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing for children affected by poverty. The ASF is made up of various funding streams totalling £1 billion, including Strategic Equity Funding (SEF), Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding (CECYP).

The Evaluation

The ASF Evaluation aims to provide learning about the overall implementation of the refreshed ASF and the extent to which progress has been made towards meeting intended outcomes articulated in the [Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model](#) in support of the SAC programme's mission.

A new [Evaluation Strategy](#) was published in 2022, which set out plans for evaluation between 2022/23 and 2026/27.

Thematic Evaluation

The ASF Evaluation Strategy included a new thematic strand of evaluation, designed to respond to emerging system priorities and to provide learning and increase the evidence base on 'what works and what could be improved, for whom, and in what circumstances' at the thematic level. The consideration of a range of thematic areas is an integral part of the new Evaluation Strategy, allowing an in-depth focus on collaboratively agreed key areas of enquiry.

Discussions with internal and external groupings (ASF Evaluation Working Group and Evaluation Advisory Panel) suggested three initial areas for thematic exploration, based on areas of continued exploration, emerging priorities and new areas of focus. These are:

- Families and Communities
- Readiness to Learn
- Engagement in Decision-making/Voice (children and young people, families and communities)

This report

The following sections of this report provide an overview on each of the thematic strands of the evaluation, including a summary of existing evaluation evidence, the results of primary research, and next steps under each evaluation theme. Further detail on each thematic strand can be found in the individual companion reports:

- [Families and Communities Thematic Evaluation Report 2024](#)
- [Readiness to Learn Thematic Evaluation Report 2024](#)
- [Voice of Children and Young People Thematic Evaluation Report 2024](#)

Thematic Strand 1: Families and Communities

The use of the ASF to support families and communities has been a developing area over the years of the Fund.

Engaging with and support for families and communities is an aspect of thematic evaluation which developed as a priority focus in the later years of the initial Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) Evaluation and was identified as one of the three priority areas of thematic focus in the new Evaluation Strategy in 2022. The report presents evidence from the Evaluation over the years since the Fund's inception and tells the story of how engagement with and support for families and communities became a key focus for ASF funding.

In order to tell the story of support for families and communities, it is important to consider the evaluation evidence over the years of the Fund and to highlight the emerging themes. The Report considers evidence across the years of ASF, predominantly using the annual retrospective Evaluation Reports as source material to highlight the emerging themes and to seek to answer Evaluation Question 8: *'To what extent has the fund embedded engagement with and support for families and communities?'*

What have we learned about approaches being developed in relation to families and communities in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge?

The evaluation evidence shows a developing picture of engagement with and support for families and communities over the years of the Evaluation. From an early focus on interventions to the development of wider strategic approaches, there is an evolving picture of support. Support and engagement ranges from parental involvement strategies, approaches to family learning, as well as a range of other initiatives and approaches such as the important role of schools/family development or link workers who often work towards supporting school attendance, engagement and participation as well as wider support to parents and carers around benefits advice and signposting to other services.

From 2019/20 onwards we can see the priority approaches developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated learning that they provided. There is considerable evidence of an expansion of some services and a pivot towards increased direct contact and support for families during the COVID-19 pandemic,

particularly the two periods of school building closures and remote learning in 2020 and 2021. While some services were expanded others were decreased or paused during the COVID-19 pandemic and we also see an increase in terms of online support and digital access. Evidence from this period highlights the importance of building positive relationships which can lead to more families turning to schools for support.

There is evidence of a consolidation of learning in the post COVID-19 period with evidence collected through the most recent Evaluation enquiry¹ highlighting a focus on making adaptations based on learning and that nearly all local authorities considered families and communities a strategic priority in relation to their approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Key learning points highlighted in the Evaluation evidence include the following:

- Evidence highlights that most local authorities currently have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families. This is often driven by parental involvement and engagement strategies.
- The important role of family link workers and their ability to reach families, engage meaningfully with them and their ability to provide the relevant support required depending on context. There is evidence that these roles or teams have had considerable impact universally and for those targeted, for example in terms of strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and the resultant increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils.
- Local authorities' experiences of family engagement has highlighted the important role of the home learning environment and parents' capacity to support pupils' learning.
- The importance of building positive relationships built on trust. Local authorities noted this as a factor which can lead to more families turning to schools for support, particularly during the period of COVID-19 School building closures.

Learning suggests that impactful approaches involve the following:

- Importance of meaningful and proactive engagement with families and maintaining this over time.
- Importance of effective links, collaboration and joint working with wider public and third sector partners.
- Importance of continuing to learn from ongoing experiences of engaging with families and communities in order to refine and improve engagement and supports accordingly.

Based on the Evaluation evidence, it is apparent that local authorities have utilised the Attainment Scotland Fund to support approaches to engaging with and

¹ Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation SAC Leads Survey, 2023

supporting families and communities to the extent that we can evidence an embedding of these approaches. This includes the strategic approaches that most local authorities have put in place to support engagement with parents and families. There is evidence that family link workers and similar roles and teams have had considerable impact universally and on those who have been targeted for example in terms of strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and the resultant increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils (and their families).

Thematic Strand 2: Readiness to Learn

Readiness to learn is a new focus area for the Evaluation which has emerged during the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2022. The identification of readiness to learn as a new outcome area in the revised Logic Model for the Scottish Attainment Challenge was developed through a process of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, with outcomes proposed at both short- and medium-term.

The subsequent development of a specific evaluation question, as outlined below, around readiness to learn within the Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Strategy 2022-26 led to the decision to include readiness to learn as the focus of one of the initial thematic evaluation areas.

‘To what extent was there improvement in children and young people’s readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?’

The focus for Year 1 (2022/23) of the new Evaluation Strategy was to explore the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and to use this exploratory work to develop proposals to deepen our understanding in this outcome area. Whilst the term readiness to learn is used to some extent within the education system, there is no clearly defined understanding/concept of the term in the academic literature, although linked but separate concepts such as ‘school readiness’ are used in relation to children’s readiness to start primary school.

The current research, policy and practice focus in relation to pupil attendance and absence is also key to readiness to learn, particularly in the context of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attendance. The concept of readiness to learn however, as outlined in the Logic Model, clearly includes attendance but is broader in scope. We are therefore seeking to explore different perspectives of what readiness to learn means, whether it means different things to specific groups (children and young people, parents and carers, teachers and other practitioners), and to what extent there are commonalities between these different perspectives. Children and young people’s perspectives of readiness to learn has been the initial area of focus, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty.

Secondly, we have explored learning about the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, through for example considering what

approaches are in place to support children and young people's readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Finally, we have explored how we can take this emerging learning forward into the wider evaluation, in order to explore the overall impact evaluation question: 'to what extent was there improvement in children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing'.

What does readiness to learn mean to children and young people?

Two projects funded as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes have supported an initial exploration of what readiness to learn means to children and young people.

Young Scot has been taking this forward through its #YSEquity Panel of children and young people established as part of its work in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Young Scot has been exploring what readiness to learn means, firstly for #YSEquity Panel members, and using this learning to co-design a survey, 'What I need to learn', to gather responses from children and young people across Scotland. The survey, which over 1,000 children and young people aged 11 years old upwards responded to from November 2023 to January 2024, suggests that readiness to learn is associated with a broad number of aspects of children and young people's lives in relation to attending and engaging in school.

Overall, aspects highlighted suggest readiness to learn includes, amongst other things, being prepared, having the material resources needed, not being hungry or stressed, feeling or being safe, valued, respected, feeling supported and being confident and happy.

Full findings from the survey will be available in a range of formats from [Young Scot Observatory](#), the hub for Young Scot's insight work.

Findings will support ongoing understanding and exploration of readiness to learn from children and young people's perspectives. This will include ongoing exploration by the #YSEquity Panel as part of Young Scot's Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme-funded activities.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland Cost of the School Day Project

As part of the Voice Network launched during Challenge Poverty Week in October 2023, CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day Big Question has explored the views of children and young people across primary and secondary schools participating in the Voice Network on many different themes related to the Cost of the School Day. With over 4,500 responses across primary and secondary pupils, the Big Question included a focus on children and young people's perspectives of readiness to learn.

The Big Question findings on readiness to learn highlight the importance of food in relation to readiness to learn. In primary school settings, having enough food was very important for 86% of those who participated in the survey, and quite important for 13%, whilst in secondary school settings, having enough food was very important for 67% and quite important for 30%.

In response to 'What other things do you need to be ready to learn?', those in both primary and secondary settings most frequently highlighted not being tired or stressed. For those in primary settings, feeling that grown ups are listening to you and that your opinions are important was second most frequently highlighted, followed by being able to take part in the same things at school as your friends and classmates. In secondary settings, having pens, pencils and other things you need for school was second most frequently highlighted, followed by being able to take part in the same things at school as your friends and classmates.

Young people offered invaluable insights into what they need outside of school, in school, in the classroom and from the people around them to feel ready to learn. Many of the examples provided, such as sufficient food, uniform, lack of worry and stress, resources for learning and equal participation, are strongly influenced by family income. Young people's responses tell us more about the barriers and enablers to readiness to learn and the kinds of approaches required from practitioners and policymakers to remove barriers and support attendance, engagement, confidence and wellbeing.

Full findings on the Big Question will be available in a range of formats from [CPAG in Scotland](#).

The views of children and young people highlighted to date through these two complementary pieces of evidence-gathering have started to indicate what children and young people consider readiness to learn means and feels like.

Continued engagement with children and young people will help to support an ongoing understanding about what readiness to learn means. Starting to explore the views of teachers and other practitioners is an important next step.

What have we learned about approaches being developed in relation to readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge?

Prior to the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in March 2022, there were a range of approaches and interventions in progress across local authorities as part of the Attainment Scotland Fund which broadly link to the concept of readiness to learn. This included approaches and interventions designed to support children and young people's engagement and attendance, often delivered in partnership with third sector organisations.

Since the 2022/23 academic year, local authorities were required to establish Stretch Aims for a set of "Core" measures, including local Health and Wellbeing Stretch Aims, as well as having the opportunity to establish 'Plus' Stretch Aims. The first set of Stretch Aims, submitted in 2022 for the 2022/23 year, included many local Health and Wellbeing Stretch Aims related to attendance, with a number of local authorities also setting 'Plus' Stretch Aims related to the concept of readiness to learn. With Stretch Aims submitted in 2023 for 2023-26, all local authorities included attendance-related local Health and Wellbeing Stretch Aims. Whilst no 'Plus' Stretch Aims submitted for 2023-26 specifically mentioned readiness to learn, a number of local authorities included nurture-based and Cost of the School Day-based 'Plus' Stretch Aims. There were also examples of a local authority-wide focus on readiness to learn for the Scottish Attainment Challenge within Strategic Equity Plans.

There is further evidence of focus at the local authority level on readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge from the Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads Survey 2023. This indicates that, amongst the nineteen local authorities who responded to the survey, readiness to learn is a strategic priority for local authorities, and that Attainment Scotland Funding was viewed as being used to support the development of approaches to readiness to learn within local authorities. A range of examples of readiness to learn approaches supported through the ASF were provided, with respondents frequently highlighting more than one aspect as supporting readiness to learn, for example attendance, the work of family link workers, and nurture.

Going forward, we will continue to gather evidence and explore local authority approaches in relation to readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

How does this thematic work inform our ongoing evaluation?

The thematic focus has supported an exploration of readiness to learn within the Impact Feasibility Study undertaken in 2023. The Impact Feasibility Study² considered approaches to evaluating the impact of the Attainment Scotland Fund, and as part of this, considered how best to approach assessing improvements in readiness to learn in order to address the evaluation question 'to what extent was there improvement in children and young people's readiness to learn through

² A summary of the Impact Feasibility Study is available in the annex of the [ASF Analytical Plan Year 2 \(2023/24\)](#)

focusing on engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing'. One of the particular opportunities for assessing an improvement for readiness to learn which has been explored is through existing data and evidence, including the Health and Wellbeing Census, PISA and Growing Up in Scotland (GUS).

The impact evaluation will draw on insights from the thematic focus on readiness to learn to inform the development of approaches to assessing improvements in readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Thematic Strand 3: Engagement in Decision-making/Voice: children and young people focus

The refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model in 2022, alongside the refresh of the overall Scottish Attainment Challenge, introduced a new outcome domain related to engagement of children and young people, families and communities in decision-making, reflecting the importance of engaging children and young people, families and communities in decision-making in the Scottish Attainment Challenge context.

This led to the development of a new evaluation question in the Evaluation Strategy 2022-26 related to engagement in decision-making/voice.

'To what extent were children and young people and their families and communities engaged in decision-making, what was the impact of this engagement, and was there evidence of engagement becoming embedded in the learner journey?'

Children and young people's right to participate in decisions affecting them, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), was incorporated into Scottish legislation in January 2024. In the Scottish Attainment Challenge, as in other areas of education, learner participation is crucial in ensuring that children and young people have a voice in the decisions that most affect them. It is particularly important that children and young people affected by poverty – those that the Scottish Attainment Challenge is designed to support – are able to influence and engage with the decisions that affect their school and education.

The specific focus for this theme in Year 1 was therefore agreed as children and young people's engagement in decision-making in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The thematic work aims to map out children and young people's engagement in decision-making across the Scottish Attainment Challenge, in order to start to assess the extent to which they are engaged in decision-making, how this differs across schools and local authorities, and across the learner journey, as well as any evidence of the difference such involvement is making, what is working well and what could be improved in such engagement.

What does the evidence gathered to date tell us?

To support this initial mapping exercise, a number of evidence sources have been considered, including data gathered through the Local Authority Scottish Attainment Challenge Leads survey undertaken in 2023. Overall, findings from the survey

indicate that, in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, engagement in decision-making of children and young people, families and communities is a strategic priority to some extent for most local authorities who responded to the survey. Findings also suggest Attainment Scotland Funding is supporting the development of approaches to engaging children and young people, families and communities in local authorities in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge to some extent. Local authorities responding to the survey were invited to provide further detail on their work in this area, with responses highlighting a range of interventions, programmes and approaches. Participatory Budgeting (PB) was noted as an important mechanism for increased engagement in decision-making by children and young people in relation to Pupil Equity Funding (PEF). However, there was acknowledgement by some survey respondents of the need for further work in engaging children and young people in decision-making in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Whilst engagement of children and young people in decision-making did not appear explicitly within 'Plus' Stretch Aims submitted by local authorities in 2022-23 and 2023-26, there are instances where engagement in decision-making was clearly an element within 'Plus' Stretch Aims. Additionally, the process some local authorities undertook to develop their Stretch Aims provided examples of children and young people's involvement, although this was noted as an aspect in which there would be further scope for their engagement going forward.

Case studies on engaging children and young people in decision-making

A number of case studies which seek to provide insight into the range of work currently in progress to engage children and young people in decision-making across the Scottish Attainment Challenge are included in the individual companion report. As this thematic aspect progresses, we will continue to develop and share case studies to build awareness of approaches to and benefits of children and young people's engagement in decision-making in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge and support system-wide developments in relation to children and young people's engagement.

Key learning points

Overall, the evidence considered suggests that:

- There is a range of activity in progress to engage children and young people in decision-making in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge.
- Some of the work taking place engaging children and young people is specific to the Attainment Scotland Fund, but much is part of wider work around engaging children and young people in decision-making within local areas.
- Actions are taking place at a range of levels. Participatory Budgeting (PB) is one approach being utilised within schools in relation to PEF, as evidenced by the inclusion of this approach as part of School Improvement Plans. Activity through the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes also provides a key route.

- There are numerous examples where this work is effectively taking place and developing but is also clearly an area where further developments are progressing and/or planned.
- Good practice is developing, and utilising work initiated through the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes, through local authorities and other settings.
- Resources to support children and young people's decision-making in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge are also developing.

Conclusion

Analytical activity has progressed in Year 1 on the thematic strands of families and communities, readiness to learn and children and young people's engagement in decision-making/voice with an overall aim to provide learning and increase the evidence base on 'what works and what could be improved, for whom, and in what circumstances' at the thematic level.

This summary report brings together an overview 'stock-take' on progress on each of the thematic evaluation strand as we seek to engage in a deeper dive within the selected outcome areas in the Logic Model. Further detail is provided in the individual companion reports.

There are also clear connections and cross cutting themes between the three thematic areas:

- Families and communities are to an extent a broad umbrella area of thematic focus with the exploration of this theme helping to illustrate where readiness to learn and engagement in decision-making/voice are connected.
- Families and communities can be seen as an over-arching theme within which a range of engagement activities are being carried out.
- Initiatives and approaches designed to support readiness to learn are often linked to family and community approaches. This includes, for example, Home Link teams working to support engagement/re-engagement in learning, Engagement Officer approaches, nurture, and partnerships with third sector organisations providing bespoke interventions to support children, young people and families in their readiness to learn.

On the Families and Communities theme, the evaluation evidence points to an embedding of these approaches through local authorities' use of the ASF to support engagement and support for families and communities. Whilst the thematic focus on Families and Communities in the ASF Evaluation is now complete, there will continue to be a focus on parents/carers, families and communities through the Engagement in Decision-making/Voice and Readiness to Learn themes.

On the Readiness to Learn theme, a number of areas of exploration are in progress or planned. This includes further exploration to establish a greater shared understanding of the term readiness to learn, continuing to explore children and young people's perspectives, and building aspects related to readiness to learn into the impact evaluation.

In terms of continued consideration of the Engagement in Decision-making theme, we will continue to progress this in relation to children and young people's engagement in decision-making, taking forward the learning which has emerged to focus our approach. There will also be a greater focus on:

- Families' and communities' involvement in decision-making in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge;
- What is working well and what could be improved in engaging children, young people and their families and communities in decision-making;
- What difference did children and young people's, families' and communities' involvement in decision-making make.

Whilst we continue to explore the focus going forward for the thematic strand of the evaluation with the ASF Evaluation Advisory Panel, it is proposed that as well as the continued focus on readiness to learn and engagement in decision-making/voice, we develop a new focus on learning and teaching outcomes from the Logic Model.

Annex A: Key Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions for Thematic Areas

<p>Families and Communities</p> <p>To what extent has the fund embedded engagement with and support for families and communities?</p>	<p>What has been learned about engaging with families and communities through the ASF?</p> <p>What are the emerging impacts of engagement with families and communities as a result of the ASF? (e.g. improved understanding of families' circumstances and additional support needs; improved understanding of local context)</p> <p>What were the views of wider stakeholders (children and young people, families and communities, and third sector organisations) of approaches to engagement with and support for families and communities?</p>
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<p>Readiness to learn</p> <p>To what extent was there improvement in children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?</p>	<p>To what extent were engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing features of school and local authorities' approaches?</p> <p>How do schools and local authorities monitor and evaluate progress on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?</p> <p>How did stakeholders perceive a focus on 'readiness to learn' would support progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty? What evidence is being gathered in support of this?</p> <p>What has been learned about approaches to engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing in support of progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty?</p> <p>To what extent has there been an improvement in children and young people's 'readiness to learn' through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?</p>
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<p>Engagement in Decision Making</p> <p>To what extent were children and young people and their families and communities engaged in decision-making, what was the impact of this engagement, and was there evidence of engagement becoming embedded in the learner journey?</p>	<p>How and to what extent were children and young people and their families and communities engaged in decision-making?</p> <p>Did this differ across schools and Local Authority areas, and/or across stages of the learner journey (eg primary versus secondary)?</p> <p>What difference did children and young people's involvement in decision-making make?</p> <p>What difference did families and communities involvement in decision-making make?</p> <p>What is working well and what could be improved in engaging children, young people and their families and communities in decision-making?</p> <p>To what extent is engagement in decision-making embedded in approaches and across stages?</p>
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The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

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