

# Scottish Attainment Challenge – 2022/23 local stretch aims for progress in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap

December 2022



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### Introduction & Background

The 2022/23 academic year is the first year of the Scottish Attainment Challenge under its refreshed model.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge programme was refreshed with a view to supporting education recovery and accelerating progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, building on the progress made over the course of the previous parliamentary term and the 2021/22 academic year. A key element of that progress, set out in [Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021](#), was the progress in raising the profile of and embedding an ethos of equity in education:

“Important strengths of the Scottish approach include: a systemic change in terms of culture, ethos and leadership; a strengthened awareness of the barriers facing children and young people adversely affected by socio-economic disadvantage; the significant role of local authorities in driving forward a strategic vision for equity at local level” ([Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021](#), page 6).

Having made that progress and recognised the key role of local authorities in driving a focus on equity in local systems, the Scottish Attainment Challenge was refreshed to do the following:

- Introduce a new, broader mission: *to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap*. This recognises the range of learning opportunities, experiences and support that help young people achieve to the best of their ability, regardless of their backgrounds.
- Change the approach to distributing to local authorities and schools funding from the Scottish Government’s £1 billion commitment to support education recovery and accelerate progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This included:
  - continuing and increasing the distribution of Pupil Equity Funding, with £1225 per pupil registered for free school meals going to 97% of Scotland’s schools and allocations set for 4 years to enable headteachers to make long term plans – reaffirming the Scottish Government’s commitment to empowered, professional leadership in schools;
  - continuing and increasing the distribution of Care Experienced Children and Young People funding, with £1225 per looked after child issued to local authorities; and
  - recognising that poverty impacts children and young people across all of Scotland, introducing Strategic Equity Funding, issued to all local authorities to further support the development and implementation of

strategic approaches to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap at local authority level.

- Provide enhanced support to the system through Education Scotland, including:
  - continued support to all local authorities through attainment advisors and regional teams to help develop and implement effective approaches to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap;
  - triannual AA reports which identify effective practice and clarify next steps;
  - the introduction of universal, targeted and intensive support;
  - the collaborative improvement programme delivered jointly with ADES;
  - a suite of professional learning sessions videos and activities;
  - practice sharing events and case studies;
  - a range of bespoke Scottish Attainment Challenge related publications, including [Pupil Equity Funding: Looking inwards, outwards, forwards – sharing effective practice to maximise support for learners and practitioners](#); and
  - the publication of Scotland’s Equity Toolkit.
- Publish a [Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#) to:
  - reinforce the system-wide commitment to equity in education;
  - clarify roles and responsibilities for closing the poverty-related attainment gap and encourage both continued empowered local decision making and strengthened collaboration at local levels– including between schools and local authorities, and between education services and related services to support children, young people and their families – to maximise the impact of Scottish Attainment Challenge funding and local plans; and
  - set high expectations and drive a greater focus on outcomes, through the introduction of local stretch aims as part of local authority education service planning.

Additionally, a clear theory of change in the form of a new, nested [Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model](#) has been published. This will help shape local plans. Furthermore, a refreshed, multi-year innovative and flexible [Attainment Scotland Fund - 2022 to 2026: Evaluation Strategy](#) has been published to build an evidence base over time and pursue key themes as they arise to study the impact of the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme.

### **Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress – stretch aims**

As noted above, the Scottish Attainment Challenge [Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#) introduced a requirement for local authorities to set ambitious, achievable stretch aims for progress in overall attainment and towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the 2022/23 academic year. Stretch aims are to be embedded in local authority education service improvement plans.

Through the range of commentary on the Scottish Attainment Challenge published in 2021 (Scottish Government 5-year report referenced above, [Audit Scotland](#) and [OECD](#) reports), it was clear that progress had been made in closing the poverty-

related attainment gap, but that more work was required to do so at a greater pace. The Covid-19 pandemic increased the urgency of this.

To build on the progress to date and in particular the change in the culture and ethos across the education system to raise the profile of equity in education, it is now necessary to increase our collective focus on outcomes for children and young people. The refreshed mission does this and is supported by the introduction of locally identified stretch aims. Following a great deal of engagement across the education system, it was clear that a ground-up approach to setting aims for the pace of progress would secure greater buy-in from local authorities and schools than setting national stretch aims for 2022/23. This has enabled local authorities to account for their own local contexts, starting points and cohorts in setting their ambitious stretch aims for progress in 2022/23.

In summary, the requirement for stretch aims was introduced to support the following aims:

- to contribute to the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge: *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 drive an enhanced focus on outcomes and a transparent culture of using data for improvement;
- to ensure ownership of progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap is shared appropriately between Scottish Government, Education Scotland and local government;
- to implement a ground-up approach to informing a national picture of the collective ambition of the education system; and
- to help tackle unwarranted variation in attainment and progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

These stretch aims represent key elements of local authorities' ambitions for recovery and accelerated progress for the 2022/23 academic year. By definition, local authorities have been asked to set stretch aims and will do all they can to achieve them. They have been set based on rigorous local processes, supported and challenged by Education Scotland, to interrogate local data and understand how best to target resources and develop approaches to best support children and young people fulfil their potential.

It is these locally developed and locally owned stretch aims that underpin a national picture of the ambitions of local authorities.

Stretch aims have been set using a "core plus" model: i.e. a "core" set of measures for which all local authorities have set stretch aims, "plus" a range of further measures which local authorities have identified as specific local priorities.

As set out in the Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress, the core aims are a subset of the 11 measures of progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the National Improvement Framework and a locally identified health and wellbeing aim:

- a) [Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels](#) (literacy for P1, P4 and P7 combined and numeracy for P1, P4 and P7 combined);
- b) the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more pass at SCQF level 5 based on the “[Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations](#)” publication;
- c) the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more pass at SCQF level 6 based on the “[Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations](#)” publication;
- d) the proportion of 16-19 olds participating in education, employment or training based on the [Annual Participation Measure](#) (APM) produced by Skills Development Scotland; and
- e) a locally identified aim for health and wellbeing, to be measured using local datasets.

In addition to these core aims, local authorities have set additional aims which recognise that progress is identified in a broader range of ways at local level than those set out nationally. These aims are of equal importance to the core aims.

A summary of local authorities’ stretch aims is set out below.

### **2022/23 core stretch aims**

The stretch aims set by local authorities indicate a key element of their ambitions for recovery and accelerating progress across the country as we collectively work to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress asked for ambitions to be set against a baseline of 2020/21 nationally published data in the interests of consistency.

In considering the data over several years it is important to note the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and on attainment data. It is clear that the interruptions to learning stemming from school closures and ongoing impacts of Covid-19 contributed to a lower benchmark for the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL) teacher professional judgement data relative to pre-pandemic data. Alongside that, the alternative approach to certification in the senior phase in 2020/21, where exams did not take place and learners’ results were based on the professional judgement of teachers based on in-school assessment, contributed to a higher benchmark.

Table 1: estimated Scotland-level aggregation of local authorities' stretch aims

	2020/21 published statistics <sup>1</sup>		Aggregated 2022/23 Stretch Aims <sup>2</sup>		Change, 2022/23 compared to 2020/21 <sup>3</sup>	
	Overall (%)	Gap <sup>4</sup> (pp)	Overall (%)	Gap (pp)	Overall aim for progress (pp)	Narrowing of gap (pp)
<a href="#">ACEL - Primary school literacy</a> <sup>5</sup>	66.9	24.7	74.2	17.3	7.3	7.4
<a href="#">ACEL - Primary school numeracy</a> <sup>6</sup>	74.7	21.4	80.5	14.3	5.9	7.1
<a href="#">School leavers, 1 or more pass at SCQF 5 or better</a>	87.7	18.2	89.5	16.0	1.8	2.2
<a href="#">School leavers, 1 or more pass at SCQF 6 or better</a>	66.0	34.4	68.2	32.5	2.2	1.9
<a href="#">Annual Participation Measure (APM)</a> <sup>7</sup>	92.2	9.3	93.4	8.1	1.2	1.2

### Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence

For **literacy and numeracy in the broad general education**, measured by achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels (ACEL) for primaries 1, 4 and 7 combined, the estimated aggregation of local authorities' stretch aims presents a very positive picture for both recovery and an acceleration of progress.

For both overall attainment and in terms of closing the poverty-related attainment gap in literacy and numeracy, the collective stretch aims of local authorities demonstrate ambitions to work towards achieving the biggest two year improvement recorded since the introduction of the Challenge (in the years for which data is available).

<sup>1</sup> From Official Statistics published by Scottish Government (ACEL and school leaver attainment) and Skills Development Scotland (Annual Participation Measure).

<sup>2</sup> Aggregation of 2022/23 stretch aims submitted by local authorities is an estimate that has been calculated by Scottish Government. It assumes the same number of children and young people per local authority, and per area of deprivation, as in the most recent published statistics for each measure (2021/22 for APM, 2020/21 for all other measures).

<sup>3</sup> Percentage point change calculated from unrounded numbers. May not match the change that would be calculated using the rounded numbers presented elsewhere in this table.

<sup>4</sup> Poverty-related attainment gap: Percentage point difference between those from the most and least deprived areas, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

<sup>5</sup> Primaries 1, 4 and 7 combined.

<sup>6</sup> Primaries 1, 4 and 7 combined.

<sup>7</sup> 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment.

Given the effect of Covid-19 on pupils' achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels in 2020/21, the aggregation of these aims represents significant local ambition for recovery back to and beyond the national position pre-pandemic.

### Senior Phase

Senior phase stretch aims have been set for progress in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap, based on the proportion of **school leavers attaining one or more passes at SCQF level 5 or better and at SCQF level 6 or better** based on the *Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations*<sup>8</sup> (SSAILD) publication. Local authorities' estimated aggregated stretch aims for these measures are also very positive.

The local authority stretch aims demonstrate a range of ambitions to sustain and exceed the level of attainment and narrowed gap in 2020/21 (both of which were affected by the alternative approaches to certification in 2020 and 2021). The estimated aggregated stretch aims represent ambitions for an acceleration of progress from pre-pandemic levels of attainment and poverty-related attainment gap.

If achieved, they would see overall attainment of one or more pass at SCQF level 5 or better improving from 85.6% in 2015/16 to 89.5% in 2022/23; and one or more pass at SCQF level 6 or better improving from 61.7% in 2015/16 to 68.2% in 2022/23.

For the poverty-related attainment gap, this would be narrower than it has been since the launch of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, narrowing from 20.3 percentage points (pp) in 2015/16 to 16.0pp in 2022/23 at level 5 or better; and narrowing from 38.5pp in 2015/16 to 32.5pp in 2022/23 at level 6 or better.

As highlighted above, given the use of alternative approaches to certification in 2020 and in 2021, particular care must be taken when making comparisons across different years. Interpretation of changes must take full account of the different certification methods used in different years, and changes in the attainment levels in 2019/20 and 2020/21 should not be seen as an indication that performance has improved or worsened, without further evidence.

Further to the aims for attainment recorded through SSAILD, learners in the senior phase are being supported in local settings to achieve a wide range of qualifications and awards that suit their own particular ambitions and pathways – in keeping with the Curriculum for Excellence. These include qualifications such as foundation apprenticeships and national progression awards.

### Annual Participation Measure

Local authorities' aims for **the Annual Participation Measure** (APM) also show ambition for improvement from a generally high starting point.

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<sup>8</sup> The senior phase attainment statistics in the Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations publication consider National Qualifications achieved by school leavers throughout all stages of their school education. The measures focus on those who, upon leaving school, have achieved one pass or more at SCQF level 5 or better and at SCQF level 6 or better. These statistics differ from SQA result statistics published in August which present qualification level results of all candidates (not just those leaving school) for an individual academic year.

In terms of the APM, if achieved, the estimated overall improvement implied by the stretch aims would represent the second largest two year improvement observed in the years since the introduction of the Challenge. The largest improvement was observed between 2015/16 and 2017/18.

In terms of the APM poverty-related outcomes gap, if achieved, the estimated narrowing of the gap implied by the stretch aims would be broadly comparable to the improvements observed in most other two year periods since the introduction of the Challenge, therefore seeing improved outcomes and enhanced life chances for young people.

A breakdown of local authorities' aims which underpin the aggregated aims set out above can be found in [supplementary tables](#) published alongside this summary document. These supplementary tables display a high level breakdown of local authorities' aims. The education service plans, of which these stretch aims are a part, are (or are scheduled to be) published on local authority websites. These contain a wealth of further context and background on the aims themselves and the plans which underpin them.

As noted above, given the impact of Covid-19, caution should be taken when looking for any trends in data across academic years. Further, local authorities' ambitions are underpinned by a range of factors unique to each local context and therefore direct comparisons should not be made. These include, for example, different concentrations of poverty, different geographies, different demographics, different urban and rural make-ups, varied impacts of Covid-19 on children and young people in different locations and different starting points for recovery and accelerating progress – themselves influenced by factors such as those just listed.

The health and wellbeing measures set by local authorities are varied, given local authorities' various approaches to tracking and monitoring children and young peoples' health and wellbeing. Common measures selected by local authorities are for attendance and participation.

### **2022/23 plus stretch aims**

The plus stretch aims developed by local authorities in addition to their core aims summarised above are varied both in content and presentation, with the majority of local authorities submitting stretch aims which cover both primary and secondary sectors. Some plus stretch aims have accompanying narrative/rationale outlining the process local authorities have undertaken in order to agree and establish their plus stretch aims. In a small number of instances, local authorities have referenced improvement work (such as related to nurture/wellbeing) which they propose to undertake in 2022/23 prior to the setting of relevant plus aims in 2023/24.

Most local authorities have established aims both at overall level and various levels of disaggregation, often developed in response to specific local contextual factors. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintile 1, SIMD quintile 5 and the gap between SIMD quintile 1 and SIMD quintile 5 have been most frequently used as the levels of disaggregation. Some local authorities have used alternative metrics to



identify poverty-related disadvantage, such as pupils in receipt of free school meals. For example, one local authority has specified a focus on pupils in receipt of free school meals within specific school clusters as a result of their local data analysis.

As well as SIMD and pupils in receipt of free school meals, local authorities have set stretch aims focused on a range of other particular groups, including:

- at a cohort level
- care experienced or looked after children and young people
- children with additional support needs.

For example, a number of local authorities have set plus stretch aims related to attendance and exclusions for care experienced children and young people.

For many local authorities, plus stretch aims drill down into core stretch aims to focus on aspects of attainment at a more granular level, for example into the sub-elements of literacy, including reading, writing and listening and talking for particular cohorts.

Others cover a range of attainment and achievement not captured in the core aims, including, for example, broader awards such as foundation apprenticeships and plus stretch aims expressed in terms of tariff points. Several local authorities have set plus stretch aims related to leaver destinations which extend beyond the core stretch aim for the APM. This included, for example, plus stretch aims expressed in terms of the gap between initial and follow-up leaver destinations; percentage of leavers in positive destinations; and percentage of leavers in higher education.

In a small number of instances, local authorities have specified stretch aims related to early years, such as meeting early years developmental milestones and achievement of early level literacy and numeracy. In one instance, a stretch aim has been set in terms of reducing youth homelessness across the local authority. Reducing the Cost of the School Day stretch aims were also included by a few local authorities, as were stretch aims related to nurture, readiness to learn and parental engagement. One local authority specifically mentioned the cost of living crisis as a contextualising factor, highlighting the potential impact on pupil attendance.

## **Summary**

It is clear from local authorities' stretch aims that there continues to be a great degree of ambition across the country to deliver on the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge *to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap*. This should be commended, in particular as children, young people and families are impacted by the ongoing effects of Covid-19 and the current cost of living crisis.

## **Next steps**

This is the first year of the Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress and the requirement for local authority stretch aims. This Framework will be updated to take account of feedback from local authorities on the process this year and to reflect the changes to the National Improvement Framework, due to be published in mid-

December 2022. It will remain subject to change as the National Discussion, Professor Hayward's Independent Review on the future of Qualifications and Assessment and the reform of the SQA and Education Scotland deliver and implement from next year. The Scottish Government will work with Education Scotland and local government to update the Framework for 2023/24, taking on board the learning from this year.

Stretch aims themselves will not necessarily lead to progress on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Key to progress is the continued focus on the work at school, local, regional and national level to support children and young people, with appropriate approaches, pathways and resources to ensure that they achieve the best possible outcomes from their education.

The Scottish Government and Education Scotland will continue to work in partnership with and support local authorities to make progress towards these aims and deliver on the shared 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* over the course of this academic year and beyond. This work is more important than ever given the impact of Covid-19 and the current cost of living crisis on children and young people and their families. Key to this will be the continued investment of £1 billion in the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Education Scotland's ongoing support and challenge to schools and local authorities through regional teams and its range of professional learning opportunities and published resources.



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The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80525-340-2 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, December 2022

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA  
PPDAS1196522 (12/22)

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