

# Scottish Attainment Challenge – local stretch aims for progress in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap 2023/24 – 2025/26

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## Introduction and background

The introduction of local stretch aims has been a key development in recent years to support and drive progress in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Stretch aims were introduced through the Scottish Attainment Challenge [Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#) in 2022. This includes a requirement for local authorities to set ambitious but achievable stretch aims for progress in overall attainment and in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the 2022/23 academic year across a sub-set of the 13 National Improvement Framework measures of the poverty-related attainment gap.

For 2022/23 the measures used were:

- 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 in National Qualifications at SCQF level 5 or better based on the "[Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations](#)" publication;
- c) the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more pass in National Qualifications at SCQF level 6 or better 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.

The measures listed above are referred to as “core” aims. Local authorities also set additional (“plus”) 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.

In this ground up approach to identifying stretch aims for progress, local authorities are responsible for implementing their local plans to make progress in raising attainment and for closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Their own stretch aims and their trajectories for annual progress towards them are included in their statutory improvement plans and published on local platforms.

An aggregation of local authorities’ stretch aims was [published](#) in December 2022.

## Progress towards 2022/23 stretch aims

For primary school attainment, ACEL data showed strong improvement between 2020/21 and 2021/22 and the poverty-related attainment gap returned towards pre-pandemic levels. In 2022/23 this improvement has continued. The 2022/23 ACEL data for primary school literacy and numeracy shows that collectively local authorities have made progress towards the ambitious stretch aims set for 2022/23. This is summarised below:

Overall attainment:

- For P1, P4 and P7 combined, the proportions of pupils achieving the expected Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels are at record highs for both literacy and numeracy.
- For literacy the 2022/23 figure of 72.7% is 0.4 percentage points above the previous high (72.3% in 2018/19).
- For numeracy the 2022/23 figure of 79.6% is 0.5 percentage points above the previous high (79.1% in 2018/19).

The poverty-related attainment gap:

- The gap between the proportion of primary pupils (P1, P4 and P7 combined) from the most and least deprived areas who achieved their expected level in **literacy** decreased in 2022/23 compared to 2021/22. It is also slightly narrower than in 2018/19 making it the narrowest gap on record.
- The gap between the proportion of primary pupils (P1, P4 and P7 combined) from the most and least deprived areas who achieved their expected level in **numeracy** decreased in 2022/23 compared to 2021/22. However, it remains slightly wider than in 2018/19.
- For **both literacy and numeracy** the proportions of primary school children who achieved the expected CfE level are at record highs for children from both the most and least deprived areas of Scotland.

Overall, these data provide a positive platform for progress towards the 2025/26 stretch aims set out in this publication.

For school leavers with one or more National Qualification A-C awards at SCQF levels 5 or better, and 6 or better, national data will be available through the SSAILD publication in February 2024. However, there are indications of progress compared to pre-pandemic performance. At National 5 and Higher, the poverty-related attainment gaps remain narrower than in 2019.

For the Annual Participation Measure, data published in August 2023 showed that the aggregated stretch aims for overall participation were exceeded, whilst the aggregated aims for the poverty-related participation gap were not. However, that gap was at a record low.

It is clear that children and young people – and their families – are still feeling the effects of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. However, in terms of primary school attainment and the annual participation measure we are seeing good progress and recovery from the pandemic. We will see what progress has been made in the senior phase in February 2024, but can be encouraged by this year's

National 5 and Higher data. To accelerate this progress, the Scottish Government continues to invest in the £1 billion Scottish Attainment Challenge to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap, whilst also investing heavily to ensure children and young people from all backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed – with the best pupil teacher ratios in the UK, the highest starting salaries in the UK for teachers, investment in digital devices, free school meals and the increased school clothing grant.

Despite the challenges presented by the current cost-of-living crisis and lasting impacts of the pandemic, as we look ahead there is clear ambition amongst local authorities to raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap over the next three years.

## **The 2023 Scottish Attainment Challenge Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress**

Having introduced the requirement for local stretch aims for 2022/23, the process was updated for subsequent years and set out in the [2023 Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#), taking account of feedback on some key issues from across the system – in particular our local authority partners.

These include:

- Three year aims: rather than setting annual stretch aims, they have been set for the three-year period of 2023/24 to 2025/26, aligning with both local approaches to planning for multiple years and the multi-year funding commitments to Strategic Equity Funding and Pupil Equity Funding through the Scottish Attainment Challenge.
- Recognition of a broader range of achievement in the senior phase, with all SCQF awards at A – D (captured on the Insight tool) now recognised in the aims, rather than just national qualifications. This recognises the range of different pathways children and young people take and aligns with our focus not just on attainment but on outcomes.

As in 2022/23 these stretch aims have been set under the “core plus” model, with mandatory aims across a set of core measures, with local authorities able to use local measures for a core health and wellbeing aim; and “plus” aims to be set by local authorities to reflect local priorities.

## Summary of aggregated local authority stretch aims for 2025/26

### Local authorities' core stretch aims for 2025/26

An estimated<sup>1</sup> aggregation of local authorities' core stretch aims for 2025/26 are set out at table 1 below.

Table 1: estimated Scotland-level aggregation of local authorities' stretch aims for 2025/26

Local authorities' 2025/26 core stretch aims – estimated aggregation	Overall	SIMD 1 (Most Deprived)	SIMD 5 (Least Deprived)	Attainment Gap (pp)
ACEL Literacy P1, P4 and P7 combined	78.3	70.5	85.8	15.3
ACEL Numeracy P1, P4 and P7 combined	83.3	77.8	90.3	12.4
The proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 5 based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information	91.6	84.9	97.3	12.5
The proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 6 based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information	71.5	57.6	86.5	28.9
The proportion of 16-19 olds participating in education, employment or training based on the Annual Participation Measure produced by Skills Development Scotland	95.7	92.3	98.2	5.9

### Overall attainment

These aims point to a collective ambition from local authorities to make steady and sustained progress in overall attainment over the coming three years. Further, given the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and on national data in recent years, there is value in looking across the longer term to contextualise local authorities' aggregated aims. If these were to be achieved, it would mean that:

- ACEL literacy P1, P4 & P7 combined would improve by around 13% since 2016/17<sup>2</sup>;
- ACEL numeracy P1, P4 & P7 combined would improve by 9% since 2016/17;
- the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 5 or better based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information would improve by around 5% since 2016/17;

<sup>1</sup> Aggregation of 2025/26 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.

<sup>2</sup> When making comparisons over time, it should be noted that both analysis of the data, and evidence provided to Scottish Government by local authorities, suggests the robustness and consistency of the data has changed since 2016/17.

- the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 6 or better based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information would improve by around 10% since 2016/17; and,
- the proportion of 16-19 olds participating in education, employment or training based on the Annual Participation Measure produced by Skills Development Scotland would improve by around 5% since 2016/17.

If local authorities make good progress towards these aggregated aims, we will see sustained progress across these core measures of attainment over time. This represents positive ambition for both continued recovery from the pandemic and for progress over time.

For the senior phase in particular there may not be a linear upward trajectory of progress towards 2025/26 as approaches to certification for national qualifications continue to adjust following the pandemic.

### **The poverty-related attainment gap**

In terms of the poverty-related attainment gap, these aims and attainment to date point to a collective ambition from local authorities to see significant progress since the Scottish Attainment Challenge was introduced. Looking at data from the beginning of the Challenge (2016/17), these stretch aims, if achieved, would see the poverty-related attainment gaps across the core measures reduce by:

- around 30% in primary school literacy and numeracy (ACEL P1, P4, P7 combined);
- around 28% for the proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 5 based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information;
- around 18% The proportion of school leavers attaining 1 or more award at SCQF level 6 based on Insight (All SCQF Awards) information; and
- around 49% for the proportion of 16-19 olds participating in education, employment or training based on the Annual Participation Measure.

### **Local authorities' health and wellbeing and "plus" aims**

Stretch aims for local priorities to improve children and young people's health and wellbeing have been set by local authorities using local measures.

In 2022/23, there was a variety of health and wellbeing stretch aims, given local authorities' various approaches to tracking and monitoring children and young people's health and wellbeing. Attendance and participation were common measures selected by local authorities.

In 2023/24 – 2025/26 health and wellbeing stretch aims, there is less variety in the range of aims, with a universal focus on attendance across all local authorities, though local authorities are using a range of specific measures. The majority have set attendance stretch aims at the overall level as well as SIMD1, SIMD5 and the gap between SIMD1 and SIMD5.

Differentiation between primary and secondary attendance into separate health and wellbeing stretch aims has been a common approach, and a few have further disaggregated to include special school attendance or to include differentiation in

attendance for children and young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN). In a small number of instances, local authorities have opted to use a different metric than SIMD, providing a rationale for why this is appropriate in their local context, such as in a number of rural or island authorities. Another approach has been to focus on a comparator other than SIMD1 versus SIMD5, where a local authority has low numbers of children and young people in either SIMD1 and/or SIMD5.

The national focus on attendance is clearly reflected in local authorities' stretch aims on attendance, with many local authorities providing a detailed rationale and/or a trajectory of both historical and predicted attendance data. Approaches and initiatives in place or planned are also highlighted. This includes detail on whole school approaches, and revised frameworks and guidance at the local authority level relating to attendance.

In addition to the universal focus on attendance in 2023/24 – 2025/26 health and wellbeing stretch aims, several authorities have also selected other local measures which reflect their own priorities or contexts. This includes a focus on nurture. A few local authorities specified the use of wellbeing surveys. In one instance, a local authority measured health and wellbeing needs using a local authority-wide lifestyle survey to align support with initiatives taking place across the local authority to help support children and families. Another local authority referenced the use of data from the Health and Wellbeing Census 2022 to focus on mental wellbeing.

As in the “plus” stretch aims set for 2022/23, local authorities have set a broad range of “plus” stretch aims for 2023/24 – 2025/26, with a degree of variety both in presentation and content.

Whilst there is a degree of consistency between 2022/23 and 2023/24 – 2025/26 “plus” stretch aims set by individual local authorities, overall there is a slight narrowing into a more focused set of “plus” stretch aims, which is a result of data interrogation and learning from previous set of “plus” stretch aims.

As in 2022/23 “plus” stretch aims, the majority of local authorities have established aims both at the overall level and at SIMD1, SIMD5 and the gap between SIMD1 and SIMD5. Similar to the setting of health and wellbeing stretch aims, some local authorities have used alternative metrics to identify poverty-related disadvantage, such as pupils in receipt of Free School Meals. This has tended to be in response to specific local factors, such as the rural or island context of a local authority, or due to small numbers of SIMD1 and/or SIMD5 cohorts in a local authority.

There is a strong focus on care experienced children and young people across local authorities' “plus” stretch aims for 2023/24 – 2025/26. An approach taken by several authorities has been to drill further down into core stretch aims for the care experienced children and young people cohort. Looked after children and young people is also an area of focus, and in a small number of instances stretch aims distinguish between a focus on children and young people looked after at home versus children and young people looked after away from home.

There is small number of instances of nurture-based “plus” stretch aims, usually related to specific local authority approaches or initiatives. Early years-related “plus”

stretch aims have also been set by several local authorities. This has included a focus on early years developmental milestones, as well as on uptake of early learning and childcare.

A further focus for “plus” stretch aims has been a disaggregation of core stretch aims, such as focusing on ACEL Literacy and ACEL Numeracy disaggregated to Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 rather than combined, and a further focus on ACEL Literacy and Numeracy at S3.

Reducing exclusion rates has also been an area of focus for some local authorities, either across primary and secondary or focusing on specific aspects or cohorts such as care experienced children and young people. In one local authority, there was a focus on reducing exclusion rates specifically for children and young people with ASN.

It is apparent in several local authorities that local context has been a key driver for setting specific stretch aims. For example, specific “plus” stretch aims have been set related to leaver destinations in some instances. As in 2022/23, one local authority has set a “plus” stretch aim for 2023/24 – 2025/26 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 in 2022/23.

### **Summary**

The collective ambition evident in the stretch aims is encouraging as the system – and children and young people – navigate the lasting impact of the pandemic followed by the current cost of living crisis, both of which have raised the barriers to learning created by poverty.

Current attainment, the poverty-related attainment gap and stretch aims for progress all vary significantly across local authorities, in many instances reflecting the range of different contexts in which local authorities operate. Some variation is appropriate, but in general children and young people should have equal opportunities to succeed, suggesting that we have more work to do to raise attainment for all and reduce unwanted variation. If good progress is made towards the 2025/26 local stretch aims, we will see variation in performance across the core measures reduce.

Individual local authorities’ aims are available on [gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot).

To support local authorities to make progress towards their stretch aims, Scottish Government and Education Scotland, working with local authority partners, will use the intelligence the stretch aims provide to inform their ongoing support and challenge to drive progress.



## **Support and challenge to local authorities to make progress**

In providing that support, focusing firstly on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, the Scottish Government will continue to support schools and local authorities through its £1 billion investment in the SAC programme over the course of the parliamentary term. Within that is continued investment in Pupil Equity Funding, empowering headteachers to develop local approaches to suit their children and young people's needs; and investment in Strategic Equity Funding to local authorities to implement strategic approaches to closing the gap in their local authorities – and make progress towards their stretch aims. Additionally, the Scottish Government through the SAC programme also continues to provide funding to support care experienced children and young people's attainment and wellbeing. We will also look internationally to continue to develop our understanding of how progress in closing poverty-related attainment gaps has been achieved and sustained.

Alongside that, Education Scotland through its team of Attainment Advisors will continue to support and challenge schools and local authorities. This will include a clear plan for Education Scotland support and challenge for each local authority, as well as ongoing engagement throughout the academic year to ascertain and report on the progress of local authorities towards trajectories and therefore progress towards their stretch aims for 2025/26. Education Scotland will also work with local authorities to strengthen collaboration with schools in ascertaining local progress.

Education Scotland will continue to work with and provide support to local authorities in refining, tracking and monitoring processes as well as sharing good practice. This will strengthen the ability of local authorities to analyse data at regular intervals and report robustly on progress towards their stretch aims. Ongoing delivery of the Self Evaluation for Continuous Improvement programme will support local authorities in their approaches to planning and evaluation. Targeted support for local authorities will continue, through the analysis of data, and will be scoped in collaboration with local authorities. There will continue to be a link Attainment Advisor for each local authority but the team will be used more flexibly to support identified local authorities where added national resource could increase the pace of progress with improvements as well as tackling variation.

Education Scotland will continue to regularly publish materials to support improvements in learning and teaching. Further, Education Scotland has developed Scotland's Equity Toolkit as a learning resource which will be continually updated as evidence, research and effective practice emerges. This will continue to be promoted to teachers as a means of accessing good practice and professional learning.

To drive improvements in overall attainment the Scottish Government continues to invest to give children and young people the best educational experiences, by investing to see over 2,000 more teachers in the system than before the pandemic, with the ratio of pupils to teachers at its lowest since 2009; providing 72,000 devices and 14,000 internet connections to pupils at risk of digital exclusion; providing universal free school meals to pupils in primaries 1-5; and with a record number of school buildings in a good or satisfactory condition.

Additionally, we are undertaking an ambitious programme of education reform with the aim of improving outcomes for young people, supporting Scotland's teachers and practitioners and delivering excellence and equity for all.

Over the course of the coming three years, both locally and nationally, we will track, monitor and report on progress towards these stretch aims in line with the requirements set out in the SAC Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress.



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

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EH1 3DG

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