Education, Children and Young People Committee

Scottish Attainment Challenge

Contents

Education, Children and Young People Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and matters relating to the Historical Abuse Inquiry within the responsibility of the Deputy First Minister.

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Executive summary

1.   The Committee recognises and commends the excellent work being done by individual schools and local authorities. The commitment of teachers and headteachers who spoke to the Committee was striking and inspirational. In this report, despite the challenges that were set out in evidence, the Committee wants to highlight this work as well as making some recommendations aimed at improving the attainment challenge policy.

2.   The Committee notes the conclusion from Audit Scotland that the poverty-related attainment gap remains wide with limited progress on closing the gap and that inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19.

3.   Whilst work to tackle the impact of poverty on educational outcomes was being done in some schools and local authorities before the start of the attainment challenge, the Committee notes evidence that the attainment challenge has heightened knowledge and awareness of the barriers faced by children and young people living in poverty and what works in trying to tackle them.

4.   It is important to understand the full extent to which the pandemic has impacted on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. There is a need to establish a national baseline on which to base post-pandemic targets. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out how it will, as a matter of urgency, establish a national baseline for measuring progress in closing the attainment gap following the pandemic.

5.   The Committee recognises that there is poverty everywhere in Scotland, including in rural and less deprived areas. The Committee supports the policy of funding local authorities through the Strategic Equity Fund to ensure that targeted support is available to all children and young people living in poverty in Scotland.

6.   However, the Committee acknowledges the evidence received on the impact of the reduction in funding to the challenge authorities. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with local authorities to examine and monitor the impact of the tapered reduction in funding on the challenge authorities and reports its findings to the Committee, along with any proposed action to mitigate any detrimental impact.

7.   The Committee notes the role played by headteachers in the deployment of the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) in schools. Headteachers' capacity is the key factor in the performance of the attainment challenge. The Committee notes concerns about current challenges with recruitment and retention of headteachers. Given the critical role headteachers play in delivery and accountability for PEF spending, the Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out what steps it is taking to address recruitment and retention issues.

8.   The Committee supports the emphasis on the need for meaningful engagement of teachers, parents and carers, children and young people and other key stakeholders throughout the processes of planning, implementing and evaluating approaches for spending PEF. Protected time for headteachers and teachers is key to creating space for such engagement. The Committee asks the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that headteachers have the capacity

to work with teachers, parents, carers and pupils to consult them in a meaningful way on the deployment of PEF within their schools.

9.   The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government tasks Education Scotland with monitoring practices in schools and local authorities to ensure that the voices of classroom teachers, parents, carers and children and young people are at the centre of plans for attainment challenge spending.

10.   The Committee notes with concern evidence on variation in education performance across local authorities in Scotland. It is important that children and young people's outcomes are not dependent on where they live. There is a key role for Education Scotland to play in tackling these variations. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland is tasked with undertaking urgent work to investigate the reasons for these variations and with setting out the action it is taking to achieve consistency across the country. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland reports back to the Committee on progress with this work within 6 months of the publication of this report.

11.   The Committee notes that the attainment challenge has been in place since 2015 and during that time many new interventions have been adopted, adapted and, in some cases, abandoned. With the introduction of the refreshed approach, it is vital that lessons learned during that period are shared widely and systematically. Given the mixed evidence on whether this is happening on the ground, the Committee asks the Scottish Government to closely monitor how effectively and consistently best practice is being shared by Education Scotland.

12.   The Committee notes the role of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) in supporting local authorities and schools and promoting consistency in outcomes. The role of HM Inspectorate of Education is explored later in this report; the Committee recommends that the performance of RICs is evaluated by HM Inspectorate of Education as part of its ongoing work.

13.   The Committee notes that the poverty-related attainment gap cannot be tackled by schools alone. There is a need for strong collaboration with stakeholders, including third sector organisations which can often facilitate the vital link between school and home. The Committee is aware that the short-term nature of funding is a long-standing problem for many third sector organisations. The Committee invites local authorities to consider how multi-year funding can be offered to third sector organisations within the parameters of the Framework. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland monitors how local authorities are, where appropriate, ensuring stability of funding for third sector partners and evaluating how such longer-term relationships impact on outcomes for children, young people and their families.

14.   The Committee notes evidence that free school meals is not a reliable metric for calculating PEF allocation to schools and that this formula excludes a number of schools from receipt of PEF. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government make an early start in considering what metric it may use to determine any future allocation of school-level national funding. The Committee would welcome details of the timescales of this work and what form it will take.

15.   The Committee considers that greater clarity on the level of discretion available in relation to additionality would be helpful for school leaders in determining how to

spend these funds. Such clarity would also be helpful to those who ought to be part of the decision-making process at the school level, i.e. pupils, parents/carers and teachers.

16.   There is an active role for Education Scotland to make sure that the needs of rural schools are taken into account as part of the attainment challenge. The Committee was not convinced by the response from Education Scotland when asked what steps it takes to tackle the specific barriers faced by rural schools in closing the attainment gap. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government sets out how barriers to progress in rural schools will be tackled through the Framework and reports back to the Committee with proposals for ensuring that these schools have the same opportunities to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils as their urban counterparts.

17.   Closing the attainment gap is a complex endeavour. The Committee notes the plan for stretch aims to be set at local authority level and for this to be aggregated into national targets. The Committee seeks assurances from the Scottish Government that there will be sufficient challenge in this process to ensure that both local and national targets are ambitious and that appropriate milestones are set. The Committee also asks the Scottish Government to set out how robust national data will be produced on outcomes when local authorities may use different metrics within the 'core-plus' model of setting stretch aims.

18.   The Committee heard evidence that it can be challenging to attribute an improvement in attainment to specific interventions. The Committee is concerned that this makes measuring outcomes from the large investment in the attainment challenge difficult. The Committee notes the work ongoing in improving measurement of outcomes and considers that this work is vital to enable the impact of the attainment challenge to be properly measured. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland is tasked with ensuring that every local authority has access to relevant external expertise to enable them to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

19.   The Committee heard in evidence that there is a lack of transparency and accessibility to data on the outcomes of the attainment challenge. The Committee notes that the Scottish Government publishes a National Improvement Framework Evidence Report which provides data on education performance and closing the attainment gap nationally and at a local authority level. The Committee would welcome details of how the Scottish Government will present this data alongside local stretch aims and how parents/carers will be supported to use this tool to better understand their local authority's performance.

20.   There is an opportunity with the forthcoming education reforms to ensure that the schools inspectorate plays a full role in monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of plans to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The Committee believes it is essential that this is factored into the design of the new education agencies, which is currently ongoing.

21.   Given the size of the budget and scale of ambition, it is vital that the long-term impact of the attainment challenge funding is measured. Evaluating what types of interventions and policy approaches create better outcomes in the long-run is a vital part of any policy approach, be that at a local or national level. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government commissions a longitudinal study into

the impact of the attainment challenge policy. The study should cover the impact of the policy at a national, regional and school level.

22.   The Committee welcomes the good work being carried out by teachers, schools and local authorities to assist young people in finding positive destinations on leaving school.[i] The Committee notes the evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on the narrowing of the gap between young people from the most and least deprived areas participating in education, training, and employment on leaving school. There were mixed views in the Committee regarding the value of positive destinations as they are currently defined. The Committee did not examine the details of the types of destinations being counted under this measurement as part of this inquiry.

23.   The Committee believes that it is important to consider outcomes of the attainment challenge in terms of sustainable post-16 positive destinations and the life long learning agenda. The Committee notes evidence that the use of the system varies across the country and the current measure of positive destinations is not always capable of following a young person when their location changes. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland takes steps to address these issues so that the long-term sustainability of positive destinations can be fully tracked and measured.

24.   Education Scotland has a key role in the Framework to provide challenge and support to local authorities, headteachers and classroom teachers. Given the number of stakeholders involved in delivering the attainment challenge, it is crucial that the education agency takes ownership and demonstrates accountability for outcomes. This must be incorporated into the design of the new education agency.

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[i] There was a division on adding additional words to this sentence. See Annexe B, Minute of the Meeting of 29 June 2022, and note on 'Record of division in private' for more detail.

Introduction

25.   This report sets out the Education, Children and Young People Committee's findings on its inquiry into the Scottish Government's policy commitment to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The Committee has gathered written and oral evidence from a wide range of people and organisations and is grateful to all those who contributed to the inquiry. The Committee would particularly like to thank the children and young people, teachers, parents and carers who took the time to talk to Members about their experiences. Details of evidence received during this inquiry are set out in the annexes.

26.   The Committee wishes to highlight the commitment and dedication to closing the poverty-related attainment gap which Members have witnessed among teachers during the inquiry. The passion of teachers and headteachers and genuine care with which they approach their work has been striking. Whilst this report highlights certain issues which the Committee has identified through this inquiry, the Committee is keen to state its appreciation of the work going on across Scotland aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people. Some examples of work carried out as part of the attainment challenge are set out below:

Numeracy intervention in primary schools

One teacher was seconded to a post to provide support to teachers in mathematics and numeracy across a number of primary schools. The training was developed and funded by the local authority and seeks to build the capacity of teachers to improve numeracy and literacy outcomes. The project was focused on schools with higher levels of deprivation and lower achievement in numeracy and mathematics. The project was able to show demonstrable improvement in attainment and this helped to ensure that teachers saw it as a credible and useful intervention. [1]

English as a second language

One headteacher told Members that 99% of students in their school community are from an ethnic minority group, 85% of whom speak English as an additional language. The sizeable funds provided to the school through the attainment challenge have given them freedom to seek to address the many challenges which come from outside the school. [2]

Additional teachers

One headteacher told Members that extra teachers are the 'best resource you can ever have for raising attainment'. They have very small primary one classes (three teachers work across two classes); the difference this has made has been 'phenomenal'. Some children will not attain to the expected level but the increase in levels of attainment with an extra person working with them and their parents is 'amazing'. [3]

27.   It is important that the attainment challenge is considered in the wider context. The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland referred to a backdrop of 'unacceptable high levels of child poverty' in Scotland, with one in four children in Scotland living in poverty in 2019/20. [4] The impact of poverty on children and young people is stark and creates barriers to their attainment at school. The cost of living crisis is increasing the pressure on families in poverty who are being worst hit by rising

supermarket prices and energy bills.

28.   Research by the Poverty Alliance shows that the mental health of parents and young people living in poverty is 'a massive issue at the moment'. [5] The Committee has heard about the devastating effect poverty can have on the mental health of children, young people and their families. Members also heard that health and wellbeing is fundamental to academic success. Many schools in Scotland have used attainment challenge funding to embed nurturing approaches, focused on health and wellbeing. Teachers, parents and carers highlighted the value of such interventions, including measures aimed at improving mental health for both pupils and parents.

29.   The Committee recognises that the poverty-related attainment gap cannot be solved by school-based interventions alone. The attainment challenge does not exist in a vacuum; child poverty is a complex issue and there are many other policies and initiatives across government aimed at tackling it. Poverty and its impact must be tackled at source. However, in this inquiry, the Committee has maintained its focus on the role of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in addressing the poverty related attainment gap.

The Committee recognises and commends the excellent work being done by individual schools and local authorities. The commitment of teachers and headteachers who spoke to the Committee was striking and inspirational. In this report, despite the challenges that were set out in evidence, the Committee wants to highlight this work as well as making some recommendations aimed at improving the attainment challenge policy.

Scottish Attainment Challenge

30. The 2016-17 Programme for Government set out the Government's ambition to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It said:

> It is the defining mission of this Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We intend to make significant progress within the lifetime of this Parliament and substantially eliminate the gap over the course of the next decade. That is a yardstick by which the people of Scotland can measure our success.

31. To this end, the Scottish Government established a number of policies under the banner of the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF):

   • From 2015-16, Challenge Authorities and Challenge Schools: selected on the basis of the proportion of children living in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 20 areas (the fifth most deprived areas based on SIMD methodology);

   • From 2017 -18, Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), based on the proportion of children eligible for free school meals;

   • From 2018-19, the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, aimed at improving outcomes for care experienced young people up to the age of 26;

   • A range of national programmes which include support for staffing supply and capacity, professional learning and school leadership, Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs), and some third sector organisations.

32. In the previous parliamentary session, £488 million of the ASF funding was allocated to the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) between 2017/18 and 2020/21. Nine challenge authorities received £212 million and a further £36 million was allocated to schools with high levels of deprivation across all council areas. The remainder was allocated to national programmes (£39 million) and specific targeted funding for care experienced children and young people (£29 million). [6]

33. After the initial closure of schools due to Covid-19 in March 2020, the Scottish Government issued guidance to councils that use of the ASF could be more flexible, citing examples where funding had already been used to provide digital devices, books and other learning material, transport for children to attend school hubs and supporting home-school link workers to maintain contact with children. [7]

34. As well as the targeted programmes or funding streams, closing the attainment gap is an overall aim of the education system. As such, the universal school education offer is intended to support the goal. In addition, one of the aims of the expansion of funded Early Learning and Children provision to 1,140 hours is to improve children's outcomes and help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The attainment gap

35. The focus of the Scottish Government is on closing the gap in attainment between children from the most deprived areas and the children in the least deprived areas, attending publicly funded schools. The poverty-related attainment gap is a long-

standing and complex issue. The Poverty Alliance said that it starts in the early years and widens as children and young people move through the education system:

> From the early years, the attainment gap is stark: in 2019/20, there was a 13.9 percentage point gap in records of development concerns for infants aged 27-30 months between the least and most deprived areas in Scotland. Upon leaving school, just over two in five living in the most deprived areas achieve one or more highers (43.5%) compared to almost four in five young people living in the least deprived areas (79.3%) (2018/19).
>
> Several of the National Improvement Framework measures have not been published since Covid. However, 2020/21 data on primary school achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels shows that gaps in numeracy and literacy between primary pupils living in the most and least deprived areas has widened since 2018/19 and is now wider than at any point since 2016/17. [8]

36.   Audit Scotland published its report ' Improving outcomes for young people through school education' in March 2021 ('the Audit Scotland report'). It stated:

> The poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19. Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government's aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. The government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities must be at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-term recovery and improving education.

37.   The Scottish Government's 'Fourth evaluation report of the Attainment Scotland Fund', published in March 2021, highlighted a mixed picture in terms of the quantitative data. It said:
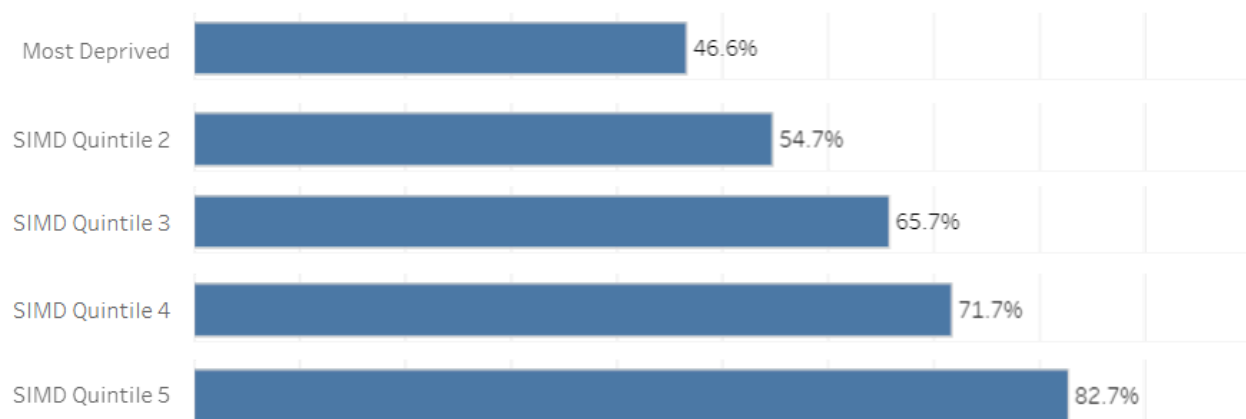
> For the majority of measures, attainment of those from the most deprived areas has increased, although in some cases not at the same rate as those in least deprived areas.

38.   The Robert Owen Institute for Educational Change said that over the last eight years they have worked alongside a range of partners across the Scottish education system to explore how greater equity can be achieved in schools:

> This has revealed how, despite the serious national commitment to enhancing excellence and equity and a huge range of well-intentioned initiatives, the most vulnerable children and young people still lose out, and that the established links between education and disadvantage have yet to be broken. [9]

39. It is important to note that the relationship between household income and outcomes in schools continues up the socio-economic status scale. For example, one measure the Scottish Government currently uses to assess progress in Scottish Education is the percentage of school leavers with at least one qualification at Level 6 – that is, a Higher or equivalent (both in level and size). The table below shows the outcomes after the 2020 diet with those percentages for each of the SIMD quintiles: [10]

Percentage of school leavers achieving 1 or more qualifications at SCQF L6 or better

Most Deprived	46.6%
SIMD Quintile 2	54.7%
SIMD Quintile 3	65.7%
SIMD Quintile 4	71.7%
SIMD Quintile 5	82.7%

40.   While progress on national or local measures has been reported as slow or mixed, other areas of progress achieved through the work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge have been highlighted in evidence. This includes a heightened focus on equity, greater capacity and improvements of pedagogy, better collaboration within and outwith the profession and the use of data.

> The Committee notes the conclusion from Audit Scotland that the poverty-related attainment gap remains wide with limited progress on closing the gap and that inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19.

Focus on equity

41.   In this inquiry, the Committee agreed to take evidence from case-study local authority areas involving witnesses from primary schools, secondary schools, and local authority representatives from selected areas. The Scottish Attainment Challenge is intended to provide significant autonomy to local authorities and schools and there are a multitude of approaches within localities. Local authorities are grouped regionally in 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' (RICs). It was agreed that scrutiny of the Scottish Attainment Challenge at the level of a RIC would allow the Committee to compare different local authorities and how they work together and with Education Scotland.

42.   The Committee agreed that the West Partnership RIC, which consists of eight local authorities across the west of Scotland: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, and West Dunbartonshire, form the case study area for this inquiry. Thirty-five percent of Scotland's school population attend a West Partnership school. There are over 1000 nurseries, primary, secondary and special schools in the West Partnership, serving mainly urban but also many rural communities.

43.   Evidence set out in this report from local authority Directors of Education and engagement with parents, carers, headteachers and teachers should be considered in the context of these views being from within the West Partnership RIC, rather than representing the position across the whole of Scotland. Some of the evidence

from Education Scotland also focused on work being undertaken within the West Partnership RIC.

44.   Education Scotland said that RICs operate within different contexts and face different challenges; they highlighted the levels of deprivation within the West Partnership RIC:

> when we look at the local authorities in the West Partnership, we should remember that it contains five of the most deprived local authorities in Scotland. South Lanarkshire, which was originally involved in a schools programme, has significant levels of deprivation. [11]

45.   The Committee heard in evidence that, in some areas, work was already being done in schools to address poverty related issues before the attainment challenge was launched. Gerry Lyons, Director of Education at Glasgow City Council, told the Committee that they have always had a focus on improving outcomes for young people in poverty; that focus was heightened by the attainment challenge. [12] The Committee also heard from teachers and parents that, since the start of the attainment challenge, there has been progress in developing the culture of focusing on equity in schools, including a greater awareness and understanding of the barriers facing children and young people. Professor Ainscow of the University of Glasgow said:

> One of the major achievements, which should not be underestimated, is that, as far as I can see, everyone in the Scottish education system is clear on the agenda. They are clear that the push for equity and the concern for excellence are central to everything. [13]

46.   In its 'Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021', the Scottish Government said:

> Over the 5-year time period a number of key elements have been put in place that provide strong foundations for on-going progress. 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.

47.   Tony McDaid, Director of Education for South Lanarkshire Council, described the 'huge impact' of the work of organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland leading to schools being sensitive to the issues, including the importance of removing barriers to participation in extra-curricular and residential activities. [14]

48.   As well as heightened knowledge of the barriers faced by children and young people living in poverty, the Committee heard that work carried out through the attainment challenge has led to schools and teachers identifying which interventions make a difference, including reaching out to families. Education Scotland referred to professional learning which has taken place since the attainment challenge began, with schools and teachers finding out 'what works'. [15]

Whilst work to tackle the impact of poverty on educational outcomes was being done in

> some schools and local authorities before the start of the attainment challenge, the Committee notes evidence that the attainment challenge has heightened knowledge and awareness of the barriers faced by children and young people living in poverty and what works in trying to tackle them.

Impact of the pandemic

49.   Education Scotland's 'Equity Audit' set out the position in relation to the attainment gap prior to the pandemic. It said:

> The Scottish Government's third interim evaluation report of the Attainment Scotland Fund which covered the 2018/19 academic year, indicated that whilst there is some progress in closing the attainment gap on a number of National Improvement Framework attainment measures, this is a varied picture depending on the measure under consideration. The report concludes that 'overall, quantitative measures of the attainment gap do not yet show a consistent pattern of improvement'.

50.   The pandemic is considered to have made existing inequalities in educational outcomes worse. According to the 'Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL) statistics' (which only covered primary schools in 20-21) the gap between those living in the most and least deprived communities grew during the pandemic. In literacy, the gap between primary pupils from the 20% most and least deprived areas was 24.7 percentage points in 2020/21 (up from 20.7 percentage points in 2018/19). The equivalent gap in numeracy was 21.4 percentage points in 2020/21 (up from 16.8 percentage points in 2018/19).

51.   There was wide agreement in evidence that the pandemic has been a set back in the work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, with the cost of living crisis adding to the difficulties faced by families. Emma Congreve of the Fraser of Allander Institute said:

> Overall poverty and child poverty are not falling in Scotland. The pandemic has put an enormous amount of pressure on low income households, and the cost of living crisis is putting even more pressure on. We need to try to think about why we are not making the progress that we wish to. That side of the equation is incredibly important to understanding why we are in the position that we are in and are having this inquiry. [16]

52.   The Poverty Alliance highlighted that before the pandemic, over one million people in Scotland, including one in four children, were living in poverty. They said that Covid-19 has increased levels of poverty in Scotland, resulting in precarious household circumstances for low-income families including not being able to afford regular, basic needs such as food and clothing. They described the impact on children and young people and their families:

> Covid has presented significant digital exclusion barriers for low-income families, and has negatively impacted on children and young people's mental health. As well as the closure of schools impacting on children and young people's attainment, the removal of many different forms of 'out of school' provision was felt acutely by priority family groups, particularly lone parent families. [17]

53. Teachers described a changed landscape post-pandemic. There was general agreement that Covid-19 has given rise to different needs; therefore, schools have had to update their improvement plans to reflect this. Teachers told Members that financial struggles have become much worse for the children and young people in their schools since the pandemic. One said that teachers are now tasked with repairing the damage of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, Members heard that teachers were already witnessing the negative impact of the cost of living crisis on children. [18]

54. There was a concern among some teachers that the impact of the pandemic may mask progress being made by some children and young people before the school closures. Several teachers expressed frustration at the loss in attainment after making head-way before the Covid-19 disruption. Some teachers said that, given the considerable impact of Covid-19, any expectation of improvement in attainment between March 2020 and now is 'completely unrealistic'. In the circumstances, maintaining levels was viewed by some as a 'great success'. [19]

55. Some of the positive outcomes of the pandemic were highlighted by teachers. One teacher reflected that a continued emphasis on children's health and wellbeing was a positive change. In addition, since the beginning of the pandemic, many teachers felt that their digital skills had improved significantly; the digital curriculum has also been accelerated. [20]

56. However, teaching unions told the Committee that, since the pandemic, there has been a rise in challenging behaviour, mental health issues and staff absences which have greatly increased the workload of teachers. [21]

57. There is a gap in robust evidence on the impact of the pandemic on closing the attainment gap. The Audit Scotland report stated that data collection on national performance for primary and early secondary pupils was cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic and that this will affect performance tracking over time.

58. NSPCC pointed to gaps in evidence on children and young people's educational experiences during the pandemic. They would welcome further disaggregation of data to understand which groups of children, and in which geographical areas, have been affected by the disruption to schooling and wider community support services. A lack of evidence on marginalised groups including refugee and asylum seekers, black and ethnic minority children and young people has also been identified. [22]

59. The Scottish Government's response to the Committee's report on its inquiry into the Impact of Covid-19 on Children and Young People said:

> the Scottish Government has published a substantial body of quantitative and qualitative evidence of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a range of different groups of learners.

60.   However, there is a need to establish a baseline from which to measure progress in narrowing the attainment gap post-pandemic. Emma Congreve of the Fraser of Allander Institute said:

>   We cannot simply say that the targets are not achievable because of Covid and that we should forget about them. Things have got worse, so it is not an excuse. If the targets are missed, we need to know why and we need to know how to get back on track. Therefore, evidence is incredibly important. [23]

61.   Professor Francis of the Education Endowment Foundation spoke of the urgent need to respond to the impact of Covid-19 on attainment:

>   it is right to say that there is an emergency in relation to the widening gaps. We need to diagnose where there has been learning loss during the pandemic and then think of short-term means to address the gap. [24]

62.   The 'Scottish Government's Recovery Plan' sets out the work being carried out as part of the attainment challenge, including a 'Covid-19 premium' injection of funds. However, the EIS said that there is a need for significantly greater overall funding in education to enable class-size reduction, more specialist additional support and the services of external agencies, such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Andrea Bradley of the EIS said:

>   we do not think that the plans that are being put in place for recovery are realistic or ambitious enough, given the impacts of the pandemic. [25]

63.   Education Scotland said that they are able to quantify the impact of the pandemic on the attainment gap to an extent with the national improvement framework data that was published in December. However, they said, 'it is difficult to quantify it in a single figure' and that it has to be examined at local authority level and school level. [26]

64.   The 'Audit Scotland report' said that the Scottish Government should work with stakeholders to agree an approach to dealing with the challenges created by data disruption in 2020 and 2021 which will affect monitoring of progress in achieving policy ambitions relating to outcomes and the attainment gap. The Scottish Government responded by saying that there is reliable data in the 2022 National Improvement Framework which sets out how children and young people are faring following the pandemic:

>   - The National Qualification results in 2020 and 2021 provide an accurate picture of the qualifications awarded to learners in those years. Comparisons with previous and future years is possible, provided it is done with an understanding of the different underlying assessment methodologies.
>
>   - The 2021 data for Insight – the tool used by schools for improvement in the senior phase – was released as usual in September, therefore schools and local authorities continue to have the same data available to them as in a "normal" year to enable them to drive forward improvement activity tailored to their own context.
>
>   - ACEL data for primary schools has been collected for 2020/21 and it is possible to compare this with data from previous years.

65. The Scottish Government said that any data gaps relate to national gathering of these data but that teachers and schools routinely assess progress in literacy and numeracy, which means that the key actors have access to the information they need to inform learning and teaching.

> It is important to understand the full extent to which the pandemic has impacted on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. There is a need to establish a national baseline on which to base post-pandemic targets. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out how it will, as a matter of urgency, establish a national baseline for measuring progress in closing the attainment gap following the pandemic.

Refreshed approach to the attainment challenge

66. On 30 March 2022, the Scottish Government published a number of documents setting out its new approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, including:

    - Framework for recovery and accelerating progress ('the Framework');

    - Pupil Equity Fund national guidance and allocations;

    - Strategic Equity Fund national guidance and

    - Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund national guidance.

67. The Framework began by acknowledging that more progress is needed. It said:

> The pandemic disrupted the learning of our children and young people and had a disproportionate impact on children affected by poverty. The refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge programme, backed by a further commitment of £1 billion from Scottish Government through the Attainment Scotland Fund, aims to address these challenges and ensure that equity lies at the heart of the education experience for all.

68. The Framework sets out the overall approach. It states that the refreshed challenge will have a 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.

69. The Framework contextualises the continuing work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge within:

    - A need to continue progress, and to speed up progress and to tackle variation in outcomes between and within local authority areas and

    - A need to address the negative impact of Covid-19 on children's health and wellbeing and learning.

70. It also states:

> Improving leadership, learning and teaching and the quality of support for families and communities and targeted support for those impacted by poverty remain the key levers to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Funding streams

71. The new approach changes the funding streams of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Compared to the previous model, the key changes are the removal of the Challenge Authority and Challenge School programmes.

72. The Strategic Equity Fund (SEF) has replaced the Challenge Authority funding, whilst Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) remains. PEF and SEF Allocations to schools and local authorities have been set out for 2022-23 to 2025-26. Allocations for the other two aspects of the Attainment Scotland Fund, the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund and the National Programmes, have not been confirmed. The totality of the spending is due to be around £200m per year in the coming five years.The table below shows the Attainment Scotland Fund in 2021-22 and the allocated funding in 2022-23:

	2021-22	2022-23
Challenge Authority Funding	£42,923,109	-
SEF	-	£44,743,505
PEF	£127,797,059	£130,490,760
Challenge Schools Funding	£7,033,543	-
CECYPF*	£11,500,000	£11,500,000
National Programmes*	£6,161,000	£13,300,000
Total	**£195,414,711**	**£200,034,265**
Covid-19 PEF Top up	£19,169,559	-

*2022-23 figures are likely estimates [27]

73. The PEF allocation, not including the Covid-related top up in 2021, will increase by around £3m compared to 2021-22 and is intended to remain the same up to 2025-26. It is worth noting that PEF began as a £120m fund in 2017-18. Taking last year as a baseline, the increase in PEF does not match the loss in funding through the Schools Programme. The greatest increase has come under the National Programmes. 2022-23 is the first year of SEF and there are transitional funding arrangements through to 2025-26. The table below sets out the SEF allocation from 2022-23 to 2025-26: [28]

	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
SEF	£44,743,505	£43,366,147	£43,020,675	£43,000,000

74. Any future allocations are subject to annual budget processes. Flat-cash funding over four years is likely to translate as real terms cuts. However, the refreshed approach confirms allocations for PEF and SEF until the end of the parliamentary term, aimed at giving local authorities and schools certainty to support long-term planning.

75. The move to multi-year funding was broadly welcomed in evidence. Moving to more stable, multi-year funding approach was a key ask from COSLA in terms of

improving service delivery and supporting greater partnership working. [29] Similarly, Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland described the three-year funding element as 'absolutely fundamental'. [30]

Strategic Equity Fund

76.   As part of the refreshed attainment challenge, the Scottish Government announced that from the next financial year funding previously allocated to nine challenge authorities (with the highest concentrations of deprivation based on SIMD) will be distributed equitably between 32 local authorities based on Children in Low Income Families (CILIF) data for the 2019/20 financial year. By directly measuring household income at the individual level, CILIF provides data on the number of deprived children in each local authority.

77.   A criticism of SIMD20 is that, as a community or small neighbourhood-based measure, it does not capture individual families who are materially deprived living in areas where this is less common. In addition, the datazones in rural areas can be quite large, which could mask pockets of deprivation using this measure. [31]

78.   The Challenge Schools funding was previously available to schools outwith those nine authorities with the highest densities of pupils from SIMD20 areas. The Challenge Schools Programme has also stopped, with some of the funding from that programme supporting the increased funding of PEF.

79.   There is a taper in the funding to 2025-26 which is intended to support the transition for the nine Challenge Authorities and to allow the other 23 local authorities to develop and scale up their approaches. Some of the challenge authorities will lose significant amounts of funding.

80.   The Strategic Equity Funding allocations for all local authorities from 2022-26 are set out below: [32]

Local authorities	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026 final
Aberdeen City	£473,825	£638,079	£955,190	£1,272,300
Aberdeenshire	£341,052	£678,005	£1,014,957	£1,351,910
Angus	£221,234	£439,809	£658,385	£876,960
Argyll & Bute	£142,162	£282,615	£423,068	£563,522
Clackmannanshire	£1,303,282	£1,034,744	£766,205	£497,666
Dumfries & Galloway	£324,859	£645,813	£966,768	£1,287,722
Dundee City	£4,993,490	£3,763,513	£2,533,537	£1,303,561
East Ayrshire	£3,127,507	£2,492,224	£1,856,941	£1,221,658
East Dunbartonshire	£133,802	£265,997	£398,191	£530,386
East Lothian	£200,099	£397,793	£595,488	£793,182
East Renfrewshire	£134,591	£267,565	£400,538	£533,512
Edinburgh City	£641,043	£1,274,381	£1,907,719	£2,541,058
Eilean Siar	£100,000	£100,000	£117,345	£156,302
Falkirk	£332,745	£661,491	£990,237	£1,318,983
Fife	£859,490	£1,708,651	£2,557,812	£3,406,972
Glasgow City	£7,806,164	£7,562,328	£7,318,493	£7,074,657
Highland	£895,005	£895,005	£1,280,783	£1,705,987
Inverclyde	£2,748,713	£2,030,319	£1,311,926	£593,532
Midlothian	£174,180	£346,266	£518,353	£690,439
Moray	£170,500	£338,950	£507,400	£675,851
North Ayrshire	£4,672,951	£3,578,650	£2,484,349	£1,390,048
North Lanarkshire	£6,454,948	£5,431,037	£4,407,126	£3,383,214
Orkney Islands	£100,000	£100,000	£109,992	£146,507
Perth & Kinross	£251,412	£499,802	£748,193	£996,583
Renfrewshire	£3,749,496	£2,940,992	£2,132,488	£1,323,984
Scottish Borders	£225,440	£448,171	£670,901	£893,632
Shetland Islands	£100,000	£100,000	£100,000	£105,660
South Ayrshire	£299,642	£435,211	£651,500	£867,790
South Lanarkshire	£1,472,616	£1,472,616	£1,857,809	£2,474,577
Stirling	£147,735	£293,694	£439,653	£585,612
West Dunbarton-shire	£1,745,797	£1,447,779	£1,149,761	£851,743
West Lothian	£399,725	£794,646	£1,189,567	£1,584,488
Total LA allocations	*£44,743,505*	*£43,366,147*	*£43,020,675*	*£43,000,000*

New funding approach

81.   As set out above, the Scottish Government is moving away from the rationale of increased support for communities with severe multiple deprivation towards support for those living with poverty across the country. The impact of the reduction of funding to the nine challenge authorities was highlighted in evidence. COSLA is supportive of the new approach:

> Poverty exists across all of Scotland and, unfortunately, every local authority has children and young people living in poverty within their boundaries. Therefore, we felt the delineation of Challenge Authorities and 'non-Challenge Authorities' was unhelpful, and that all authorities should receive additional funding to help close the poverty-related attainment gap. Moreover it was key that SAC funding was distributed on a need-basis taking into account both urban and rural poverty. [33]

82.   The education unions argued that core budgets are insufficient and should be increased in all areas, rather than cutting the funding for the nine challenge authorities. Jim Thewliss School Leaders Scotland said:

> We should know—the Government statisticians will know—the number of young people who are impacted by deprivation within those nine areas. We have had a discussion around how we define deprivation, but let us take it that there is a definition there. It is a reasonably straightforward statistician's exercise to look at how much core funding per capita was allocated across those nine areas and reallocate that per capita into the other remaining areas. I know that there is a financial aspect to this, but in terms of equity and fairness to the young people who are in the areas who have been supported in a certain way, it is surely immoral to take away that funding. We should allocate the money on a per capita basis across all the areas, working out how much was allocated per capita to the nine areas in the first place. [34]

83.   The EIS agreed that the attainment challenge should be reframed to take account of the fact that poverty exists in every local authority area and school community. However, they do not believe that this should be at the expense of budgets for local authorities originally considered to be in high need of additional support; they called for a reversal of the cuts to funding for the challenge authorities. Andrea Bradley from the EIS said:

> I have to say that we have been absolutely appalled at the levels of funding cuts to six of the original challenge authorities. It beggars belief. We do not understand why those cuts would be made at a time when we know that poverty levels are rising, when the pandemic has absolutely bludgeoned some communities and we know that individual families and the young people within those families are struggling as a result of Covid. [35]

84.   The EIS also highlighted the transition that the local authorities not previously in receipt of challenge authority money will have to make; this will require 'quite a sizeable piece of work' around professional learning. [36]

85.   The Committee heard evidence from teachers who do not believe that their schools are ready to lose the challenge authority funding. Several teachers in senior management roles in primary schools were concerned about losing funding and said that the cut would have a significant impact. One headteacher said that staffing is critical, and some positions are only possible because of this funding. Some headteachers referred to an element of panic setting in about what the next year would look like. Several teachers said that, whilst they understand the reasons for the change, the answer is not to take away money from the schools that had and needed it, but to add more money into the fund. [37]

86.   In one engagement session, teachers were asked about the impact of the reduction in funding for challenge authorities. In response, one teacher, who worked for a

challenge authority which was dealing with a 78% phased reduction in funding due to the change in policy, said that their teacher colleagues are 'raging' about this. [38] Another teacher believed that the additional funding should be made permanent; they spoke about the need for a generational change which cannot happen in only five years. [39]

87.   Laura Robertson of the Poverty Alliance agreed that all local authorities should have access to resources, with the allocation based on young people living in poverty. [40] Professor Francis of the Education Endowment Foundation said that the impact of deep poverty, and the persistent disadvantage that can engender, is a key predictor of educational outcomes. However, she believes that the issue of having equity across the board remains fundamental to social justice:

> I would argue that we must not be dragged away to focus only on the challenge of deep poverty and persistent disadvantage, important and urgent though it is. [41]

88.   Sustained and embedded practice is one of the long-term ambitions for the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The Committee heard evidence that the challenge authorities were told that they were pathfinders and that the funding has led to finding out what works. The Cabinet Secretary said:

> The pathfinders were very successful in trying out different models, looking at what worked in their systems and ensuring that the learning was shared not only in their local authority, but with others. [42]

89.   The Committee heard evidence of work being done to embed these new approaches. When asked about the move away from challenge authorities, Elizabeth Somerville, an Education Scotland Attainment Advisor, spoke of a 'motorway of sustainability and intervention that brings us to a place where we have a solid and embedded approach.' She said that there is a need to look at a sustainability strategy that might involve exiting certain aspects, maintaining them in a different way or a transfer of responsibilities. [43]

90.   Inverclyde is one of those areas which will lose Scottish Attainment Challenge funding under the new approach compared to the previous model. However, Ruth Binks from that local authority stated:

> I am not saying that I welcome it; I think that it was a fair thing to do. We needed to look altruistically across Scotland. When we started as attainment challenge authorities we were very much told that we were the pathfinders, looking at how to make things work. We were asked to adopt, adapt and abandon initiatives, which we certainly did. It is very helpful to see that many of the initiatives that the attainment challenge authorities took forward in the early days are now being rolled out more widely. I started my answer by saying that if I could keep the £2.8 million I would absolutely welcome that. It is a big cut for Inverclyde, but it is one that we always knew could and would happen …
>
> Let us look at the totality of the system and the learning that has taken place. I hope that the experience of our young people will very much benefit from the attainment challenge work that has been done to date. [44]

91.   Ruth Binks also highlighted particular challenges her authority will face:

> We are worried about whole-family wellbeing and our partnership with the third sector. We have a very good partnership with the third sector, but we will probably not be able to keep that going, given the amount of money that we will end up with in 2024-25. However, there are opportunities now for us to revise our approach by working across children's services to look at whole-family wellbeing. [45]

92. South Lanarkshire was not a challenge authority although twenty of its schools received £1.9m in 2021-22 through the schools programme. Tony McDaid from South Lanarkshire stated:

> We would not necessarily have picked those 20 schools. Those schools were picked on the basis of a particular profile, but that did not take into account rural poverty or the concentration of poverty in a couple of our schools. The bulk of the money still goes through PEF, but there is also the strategic equity fund, which comes to just over £2 million for us [£2.5m by 2025-26]. We will be able to redirect that resource to more concerted activity around the 124 primary schools and, indeed, across our 20 secondary schools as well. We can take some of the learning that has happened with the schools. [46]

93. Education Scotland said that the refresh of the challenge is the result of looking at evidence from the past six years of the challenge, which pointed to a need to accelerate progress:

> The OECD report [also] asked us to look at more universal support and hidden poverty, and to take account of the pandemic, to make sure that we were really recognising that poverty exists everywhere in Scotland.
>
> We are looking at a redistribution of the funding, not a cut to it. We should remember that the overall attainment Scotland fund has actually increased, from £750 million to £1 billion. That was the Cabinet Secretary's decision. It is not a cut to funding; it is a redistribution, and it is a different model. [47]

94. The Cabinet Secretary stated that 59% of children in relative poverty live outside the challenge authorities and that the new funding model recognised that poverty exists in all local authorities. She highlighted that funding will go to all local authorities, thereby supporting them to develop strategic approaches to working with schools, wider local authority services and national community partners. The Cabinet Secretary said:

> Through our allocations, we have attempted to ensure that there is a fair funding formula right across Scotland. There was an understanding, as was shown in the evidence from the directors of education, that we needed to look for a fair funding formula right across Scotland. [48]

95. When pressed on maintaining the current funding levels for challenge authorities, the Cabinet Secretary said that the money would have to be found within other budgets:

> The importance of recognising that poverty exists across all local authority areas, of dealing with that and of addressing the impact of the Covid pandemic across all 32 local authorities led us to change the funding formula. There is no additional money in my portfolio that is not being spent, so money would have to come from somewhere else within my portfolio. [49]

The Committee recognises that there is poverty everywhere in Scotland, including in rural and less deprived areas. The Committee supports the policy of funding local authorities through the Strategic Equity Fund to ensure that targeted support is available to all children and young people living in poverty in Scotland.

However, the Committee acknowledges the evidence received on the impact of the reduction in funding to the challenge authorities. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with local authorities to examine and monitor the impact of the tapered reduction in funding on the challenge authorities and reports its findings to the Committee, along with any proposed action to mitigate any detrimental impact.

Freedom within a framework

96. One of the shifts under the new model is a clearer emphasis on the roles of all local authorities in supporting how Attainment Scotland Fund monies are spent at school and local authority levels. The Framework provides details on the expected role of the central local authority in setting the local strategic plans and aims, supporting schools in developing their improvement plans (including the attainment challenge aspects of those) in a two-way process.

97. PEF is allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty related attainment gap. The funding is spent at the discretion of headteachers working in partnership with each other and their local authority, with PEF national operational guidance designed to help support those plans. [50]

98. It should be noted that around 3% of schools are not in receipt of PEF, including rural schools. Headteachers in these schools do not have experience of being part of the process of allocating attainment challenge funding within their schools. This issue is covered later in the report.

99. The Framework envisages 'freedom within a framework' for headteachers and their schools, with a strong emphasis on consulting teachers, parents, carers and pupils. It retains the role of the headteacher in determining approaches to using PEF in their schools. However, local authorities remain accountable for the use of Attainment Scotland Funding, including PEF. Therefore, local authorities should support headteachers and have processes in place to ensure plans are targeted and evidence based.

100. Autonomy of school leaders and involvement of teachers in decision making were key themes in the inquiry. Professor Mel Ainscow of the University of Glasgow said:

> Educational change is about implementation; you can have the best policies in the world.... but the real challenge is implementation down the levels. As I keep reiterating, teachers are policy makers, and we have not only to engage and support them but to give them freedom. We have to give teaching back to teachers. [51]

101.   COSLA agrees that individual schools should be empowered through the Framework:

> We believe there are tensions that need to be considered and resolved as part of this work. This will include ensuring that we avoid top-down setting of expectations and determining where the refreshed SAC fits the ongoing commitment to the school empowerment agenda. [52]

102.   The concern that the central local authority's role can impinge too much upon the professional autonomy of headteachers in their schools has been raised by witnesses during this inquiry. The Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change said that a tradition of rigid local authority line management can constrain decision-making amongst school leaders. [53] Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland agreed that local authorities should operate as an agency to support schools. He said:

> If the strategy is driven from the ground up and local authorities look to support the strategies that schools are devising, we are in a much better place to enable and empower schools to respond to young people's needs...Schools are more than happy to be held accountable for the strategies that they put in place if they are empowered to develop the strategies in the first place, as opposed to having them imposed on them within a local authority wide structure. [54]

103.   However, Emma Congreve of the Fraser of Allander Institute referred to difficulties in articulating the needs of individual schools at local authority level:

> Often, it can feel as though there is a disconnect between what local authorities are saying and doing and what teachers on the ground think is necessary. Part of the reason for that is that it is very difficult for everyone to get the full picture of the situations that need to be addressed at school, local authority and Scotland levels. [55]

104.   Professor Ainscow said that headteachers want more control over funding; there is a need to trust them to understand their school and context. He spoke of frustration among headteachers because they cannot design their staffing profile in order to deliver programmes that they think their children and their community need. [56] In contrast, Greg Dempster of AHDS said that most school leaders do not feel that they are being directed on attainment challenge spend. [57]

105.   The Poverty Alliance also said that much of the evidence about PEF has been extremely positive:

> Evaluations of the pupil equity fund by headteachers and schools have been very positive about the empowerment that the funding gives to local schools. It gives them autonomy with local services, and they can offer bespoke support to young people who are living in poverty or who might be at risk of being excluded. [58]

106.   Tony McDaid of South Lanarkshire Council illustrated this by saying that children in

schools in his area know that they can ask for help with costs of residential activities or uniforms; this confidence is built on relationships and staff knowing the individual children. [59] Ruth Binks of Inverclyde Council said that headteachers now feel that they are 'not alone', and are empowered to put interventions in place that will help individual families. [60]

107. The role of headteachers is key to the effective use of PEF. Witnesses told the Committee that headteachers need time and practical support in deciding how to deploy PEF within their schools. Greg Dempster of AHDS identified the lack of protected time for school leaders as a problem his members are concerned about. He said:

> If you are being pulled away to give one-to-one support to individual pupils or cover classes, that will obviously swallow up time that could be used to consider more strategic interventions, to look at your school's data, to pinpoint areas for action and improvement or to examine research and evidence on what you might be able to do to address gaps. [61]

108. Mike Corbett of NASUWT spoke of a 'looming recruitment and retention crisis' as teachers consider leaving the profession, and Greg Dempster referred to a decrease in the number of people seeking to apply for school leadership roles:

> There have already been problems with recruitment into headships, particularly in some areas, but across the board there is an issue with recruiting heads in the primary sector in particular. We asked members who are depute heads to respond to the statement, "I am a depute headteacher and I am keen to become a headteacher," and 18 per cent of those who responded were positive. To me, that would be an implication. The first time we did the survey was in 2016, when 35.7 per cent were positive. That represents a significant drop-off over time. [62]

109. Gerry Lyons, Director of Education at Glasgow City Council, confirmed that they have had challenges with recruitment, with some newly appointed headteachers having no experience of running a school pre-covid:

> there have been some challenges around the legislative requirement with regard to the into headship qualification. It is right that we want highly qualified people, but there has been a bit of a time lag between people getting that qualification and their being ready to take on the posts, and then a lag between that and getting the number of people we need. There is a bit of work to be done to improve that. [63]

110. Headteachers told the Committee that they receive support from the local authority in managing financial and administrative aspects of PEF. They also said that they felt supported by their local authorities to make difficult decisions on competing demands and priorities. [64] Professor Ainscow of the University of Glasgow said that headteachers need to have different kinds of expertise in their school offices to deal with these issues and recommended collaborative governance arrangements. [65]

The Committee notes the role played by headteachers in the deployment of PEF in schools. Headteachers' capacity is the key factor in the performance of the attainment challenge. The Committee notes concerns about current challenges with recruitment

and retention of headteachers. Given the critical role headteachers play in delivery and accountability for PEF spending, the Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out what steps it is taking to address recruitment and retention issues.

Involvement of parents, carers, children, young people and teachers

111. Meaningful involvement of teachers, parents and carers, children and young people is one of the key principles of PEF guidance. The Committee heard mixed evidence on how involved teachers and parents feel in planning for the use of PEF in their schools. Some teachers said that they were consulted on decisions on how to spend PEF in schools, whilst others said that this depended on the management style of the headteacher. [66] The EIS said:

> There could be efforts made in the context of the empowerment agenda to encourage properly collegiate dialogue and decision-making at school level as to how PEF money and/or any other funds disbursed individually to schools through SAC should be spent. The 2018-19 EIS research found that teachers are not universally involved in such discussions, this is underlined by the fact that more than 10% were not only excluded from discussions but unaware of how PEF was being spent in their schools. [67]

112. Mike Corbett of the NASUWT also described a 'patchwork picture' of teacher involvement in PEF planning and said that teachers need time to engage with PEF plans and outside agencies to deliver the collective agency approach. [68]

113. Generally, the parents reported that headteachers were consulting and informing parents about how the PEF funds were being used, often through parent councils. Some parents stated that headteachers listened to and acted on feedback from parent councils, whilst others said that they were not involved in decisions on how to use PEF in their child's school. [69] Connect also reported patchy engagement with parents and carers in planning PEF interventions. [70]

114. Children and young people should also have a voice in relation to how attainment challenge funding is spent in their schools. The Child Poverty Action Group said that pupil voice could be built on and further developed:

> At all levels, school, locally and nationally, we need to keep children's and parent's involvement, voices and lived experiences central to how we proceed and, alongside this, make the most of opportunities to have children and young people taking the lead on equity in their schools and communities. [71]

The Committee supports the emphasis on the need for meaningful engagement of teachers, parents and carers, children and young people and other key stakeholders throughout the processes of planning, implementing and evaluating approaches for spending PEF. Protected time for headteachers and teachers is key to creating space for such engagement. The Committee asks the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that headteachers have the capacity to work with teachers, parents,

> carers and pupils to consult them in a meaningful way on the deployment of PEF within their schools.

> The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government tasks Education Scotland with monitoring practices in schools and local authorities to ensure that the voices of classroom teachers, parents, carers and children and young people are at the centre of plans for attainment challenge spending.

Consistency and sharing best practice

115.   The importance of sharing best practice as part of the attainment challenge was highlighted by many witnesses. However, the Committee heard mixed evidence about the extent to which this is happening on the ground. NASUWT and others told the Committee that more could be done in sharing best practice in using the attainment challenge funding:

> There have been isolated examples of good practice from individual schools utilising the SAC funding streams; however, these are often isolated, and insufficient opportunity has been taken to share these successes and facilitate any learning where the results have been disappointing. [72]

116.   The Committee notes that there are varying levels of experience in local authorities and schools across the country in allocating attainment challenge funding. Laura Robertson of the Poverty Alliance said that whilst some work is being done in sharing best practice, local authorities need more support, especially since some interventions are not available across the country:

> The recent evaluation of the Scottish attainment challenge showed that schools widely are using the Education Endowment Foundation's learning and teaching toolkit to give them access to evidence on the types of initiatives and interventions that have worked well. There is a lot of good practice in Scotland. For example, attainment advisers have been specifically created to find and share such evidence, but local authorities need more support in carrying out that role of finding the evidence and seeing what works. On top of that, although there is a lot of evidence out there on what works, those kinds of initiatives might not be available in certain local authorities. [73]

117.   Education Scotland recently published 'Pupil Equity Funding: Looking inwards, outwards, forwards '. This was based on field work across the country and is intended to share practice and to help staff involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of PEF to reflect and build on their current practice. Education Scotland said that this document provides 'strong examples of what is working well'. [74]

118.   The Cabinet Secretary said that there are roles for Education Scotland and RICs in promoting and sharing best practice. [75] The Framework also sets out the role of HM Inspectorate of Education in gathering and sharing evidence of what is working well and where further development is needed.

119. One of the aims of the Framework is to address inconsistencies in outcomes across local authorities. The Audit Scotland report found variation in education performance across councils and in councils' spending per pupil:

> There is wide variation in education performance across councils, with evidence of worsening performance on some indicators in some councils. At the national level, exam performance and other attainment measures have improved. But the rate of improvement up until 2018–19 has been inconsistent across different measures.

120. The Cabinet Secretary acknowledged that there is variation in outcomes within and across local authorities:

> The data that we have suggests that that variation is marked, and if we can tackle that, we should do so. That is another lens for looking at the poverty-related attainment gap, because it cannot all be explained by different poverty levels in different parts of Scotland. [76]

121. Audit Scotland recommended that Education Scotland should work with schools, councils and RICs to understand the factors that cause variation in performance across schools and councils. It said that councils face different pressures and challenges, for example due to their geography, levels of deprivation, staffing levels, funding levels and local priorities. These factors need to be considered when comparing performance across councils.

122. Education Scotland highlighted the role of RICs in tackling variation of outcomes across local authorities. Improvement work can be taken from school level to local level to RICs level; Education Scotland said that these structures can minimise variation. [77] In 2021-22 national programmes funded under the ASF totalled £6.6m; RICs received £2 million to fund their work. [78]

123. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted the role of RICs in sharing best practice:

> The RICs are perhaps a part of the system that does not get much discussion. It is perhaps understandable that national Government, its agencies and local government get more attention, but the RICs form an important part of the information sharing and collaborative working. That was absolutely the intent when the RICs were established. [79]

124. The Audit Scotland report found that whilst schools and councils are getting better at identifying needs, reviewing what works, and determining the impact on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, there is scope to achieve greater consistency and impact across the system through evaluation and transfer of learning. Audit Scotland said that schools are being supported in this by RICs and Education Scotland; however, the Committee is not clear on who assesses the performance of RICs.

125. The Framework sets out the role of Education Scotland in challenging this variation and areas where there is limited progress. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted the key role of Education Scotland in providing universal support. She also emphasised the role of new 'stretch aims' in addressing variation of outcomes:

> One of the reasons behind the introduction of the stretch aims is to tackle the unwarranted variation between local authorities. We hope that the transparent mechanism that we are putting into the system will give a clear understanding of local ambitions. [80]

The Committee notes with concern evidence on variation in education performance across local authorities in Scotland. It is important that children and young people's outcomes are not dependent on where they live. There is a key role for Education Scotland to play in tackling these variations. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland is tasked with undertaking urgent work to investigate the reasons for these variations and with setting out the action it is taking to achieve consistency across the country. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland reports back to the Committee on progress with this work within 6 months of the publication of this report.

The Committee notes that the attainment challenge has been in place since 2015 and during that time many new interventions have been adopted, adapted and, in some cases, abandoned. With the introduction of the refreshed approach, it is vital that lessons learned during that period are shared widely and systematically. Given the mixed evidence on whether this is happening on the ground, the Committee asks the Scottish Government to closely monitor how effectively and consistently best practice is being shared by Education Scotland.

The Committee notes the role of RICs in supporting local authorities and schools and promoting consistency in outcomes. The role of HM Inspectorate of Education is explored later in this report; the Committee recommends that the performance of RICs is evaluated by HM Inspectorate of Education as part of its ongoing work.

Life outside school and the role of the third sector

126.   A theme in evidence to the Committee was that inequality and poverty are the key drivers for the attainment gap and therefore policies to reduce child poverty and the attainment gap should be better aligned. COSLA's submission stated:

> Fundamental to the attainment gap is tackling child poverty, and its symptoms, directly. The original SAC had placed schools at the centre of tackling the attainment gap, and our view was that there were not sufficient links made between the strategic approach to tackling child poverty, and tackling the attainment gap. This would have included the flexibility for councils and schools to use SAC resources across a wider range of services which support children and families. [81]

127.   The Cabinet Secretary stressed the importance of a whole-child approach. [82] The Framework states that work in support of improving outcomes for children and young people will not be achieved by schools alone. It said:

> Prior learning and research evidence shows us that schools and education services alone will not reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. The mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge is one that must be supported by 'collective agency' – the range of services, third sector organisations and community partners working together with families, with a clear focus on improving the educational experiences, health and wellbeing and outcomes of children and young people. In this way educators, who are at the heart of these collaborations, will play a vital role in breaking the cycle of poverty and make a long-term contribution to Scotland's national mission to tackle child poverty.

128. The Committee heard that children's learning is significantly impacted by what happens away from school and that to improve learning, there is a need to understand the wider issues impacting on a child or young person's attainment. Maureen McAteer from Barnardo's Scotland said:

> I am interested in the interface between the work on the attainment challenge fund and other Scottish Government funding streams. From our perspective, fragmentation can be challenging. A family's needs are not cut into chunks, with some being attainment issues, some being family support issues and some being early years issues. Those things are all connected, which is why a more holistic approach, rather than a school-centric approach, is essential for getting good outcomes for children, young people and families. [83]

129. Teachers highlighted the importance of the family environment and the limits of what schools might be able to achieve to militate against the impacts of poverty. They also noted both the importance, and sometimes the difficulty, of building positive relationships with parents and argued for a holistic approach to supporting families. This included considering what barriers may exist to families accessing a wide range of support. [84] An example of how one school worked with families is set out below:

Working with families

A teacher explained to Members that they were taken out of class for attainment challenge work; they were a 'protected teacher' working on attainment and led project work, including organising literacy and numeracy support for parents. They organised a 'really successful' film literacy club for parents; it is sometimes challenging to get parents into schools and being able to work on literacy skills with them through film was 'fun and relaxed'. This was only possible through attainment challenge funding and having the extra teacher whose sole purpose was to focus on such projects. The funding was there to sustain the project throughout the year. Parents were then able to take those skills back home. [85]

130. Save the Children agreed that the role of the family is key:

> While parental engagement has been recognised as a key driver for closing the attainment gap, and there are some signs of progress, this is not yet translated into consistent good parental engagement practice and improved outcomes for children. [86]

131. The Poverty Alliance and others highlighted the role of third sector organisations in providing family support. [87] The Committee heard about PEF funding school-based

support workers to work alongside children, young people and families, through Barnardo's Scotland and others. Strengthening links between school and home is a key part of this work. [88]

132. The Framework sets out a role for third sector organisations in tackling the attainment gap:

> the third sector, with its wide range of national and community based organisations whose skills and expertise are vital supports that local authorities and schools should seek to draw on to support and enhance their work to achieve the Scottish Attainment Challenge mission.

133. Gerry Lyons of the City of Glasgow Council highlighted the value of partnership working with community groups:

> We have benefited hugely from those groups working directly with our families—parents and young people—and from their working alongside our staff and letting our staff understand the issues from their perspective. [89]

134. The Committee met some children at Sidlaw View Primary School in Dundee, care experienced young people and young people in Greenock who are in receipt of support from Aberlour and Barnardo's Scotland. Some of their evidence is set out below:

Sidlaw View Primary School

The pupils talked about the support they receive from Aberlour. They spoke about how the staff from Aberlour have helped give them tools to be able to regulate their emotions, such as anger and frustration. The pupils demonstrated techniques they use such as slow breathing, kit bags and five senses to help them calm and shift focus....

Pupils spoke about how these techniques have prevented them from getting in fights, or from becoming angry and frustrated with getting answers wrong in their work. One pupil spoke about tearing their work up and storming out of the classroom. Now, they can calm themselves, rub out the wrong answers, and try again.

Care experienced young people supported by Aberlour

The young people spoke about the importance of Educational Support Workers; sometimes they are the person to encourage a pupil to get up and go to school, or attend evening appointments. It's not just about the support they provide in school, it's helping with the other things that impact on learning. This again helps with the relationship and you are more likely to ask for help with your learning from someone you have a good relationship with. Getting access to this help and support outside of school can help with the stigma faced in school.

Young people supported by Barnardo's Scotland in Greenock

The young people discussed the importance of relationships, having a support worker to listen and to help, to accept and understand, not just in school but in the community and at home too. Direct contact is important to help build relationships and trust, as well as contact with parents. Building relationships takes time; it took one young person a year to open up to their support worker.

135. The Child Poverty Action Group welcomed the refreshed attainment challenge mission's emphasis on partnership with other agencies, placing schools alongside other partners. They said that parents and staff in schools are noticing and benefiting from 'Cost of the School Day' policy commitments, including measures such as curriculum cost removal and digital inclusion. [90]

136. However, evidence has shown a variation in experience of collaboration, with partnerships with third sector organisations often being limited to the delivery of specific interventions or projects. [91] In particular, the Attainment Scotland Fund survey of headteachers in 2020 found that primary schools and those in rural areas were less likely to have seen an increase in collaborative working. [92]

137. Barnardo's Scotland stressed the importance of sustained relationships in providing support to children and young people:

> We welcome the commitment to advise schools of PEF allocations for the full parliamentary term but it is not clear whether this will result in longer term, more sustainable arrangements for partner organisations commissioned by individual schools. [93]

138. Some third sector organisations warned of a risk that greater autonomy for schools could lead to fragmented decision-making, leaving schools and local authorities less able to make links and spend funds on the most impactful activity. [94] Whilst the Princes Trust agreed that the central role played by local authorities is important, the devolution of spending to individual schools presents challenges in developing and co-ordinating strategic activity:

> We fully recognise the advantages of transferring responsibility for decision making and funding from local government to head teachers. However, this model does impede the implementation of scalable interventions which can be adapted to the needs of individual schools. [95]

139. Continuity of support for children and young people can be an issue when interventions are determined at school level. Maureen McAteer of Barnardo's Scotland said that a pupil may get vital support at one school but then lose that support if they move to another school where the PEF priorities are different:

> We are seven years down the line and there are some things that we know are essential and that should be in place for every child in every family, because we have learned an awful lot over that period. I just wonder whether there should be a bit more focus on putting some of those big rocks into place while still allowing flexibility at the individual school level. [96]

The Committee notes that the poverty-related attainment gap cannot be tackled by schools alone. There is a need for strong collaboration with stakeholders, including third sector organisations which can often facilitate the vital link between school and home. The Committee is aware that the short-term nature of funding is a long-standing problem for many third sector organisations. The Committee invites local authorities to consider how multi-year funding can be offered to third sector organisations within the parameters of the Framework. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland
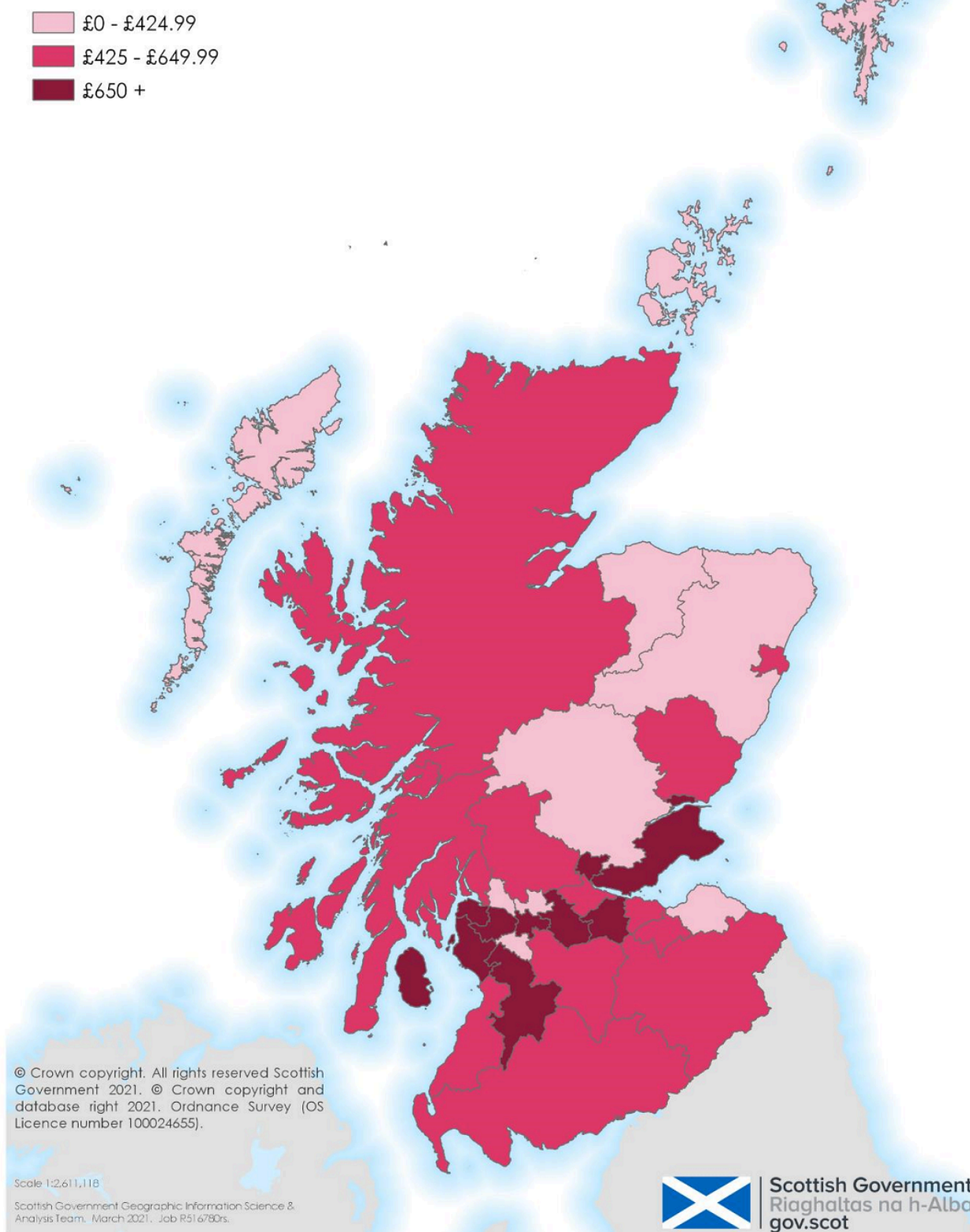
> monitors how local authorities are, where appropriate, ensuring stability of funding for third sector partners and evaluating how such longer-term relationships impact on outcomes for children, young people and their families.

PEF: free school meals metric

140. PEF funding is based on estimates of statutory eligibility for free school meals at a school level. The map below shows PEF funding total spend from 2017/18 to 2019/20 (P1-S3): [97]

Pupil Equity Funding

Combined Allocation 2017/18, 2018/19 and
2019/20 per pupil (P1 - S3)

☐	£0 - £424.99
☐	£425 - £649.99
☐	£650 +

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Scale 1:2,611,118

Scottish Government Geographic Information Science &
Analysis Team. March 2021. Job R516780rs.

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141. The Committee considered whether free school meals is the best way to calculate
PEF allocations and whether the time may be right to move away from this metric.
Changes to metrics for allocating funding have to be carefully considered. Emma

Congreve of the Fraser of Allander Institute highlighted the importance of having the best evidence to ensure that funding is reaching those who need it:

> There are concerns about our being able to collect robust evidence. Eligibility for free school meals has been used for a long time as a measure to help with funding allocations, but we know that it applies only to people who register for free school meals, not to everyone who actually needs them— if I can use that word.... Moreover, some measures are not as significant in rural areas as they are in urban ones. [98]

142. The move to universal free school meals in primary schools means that, come the end of the funding in 2025-26, it is likely that there will be a need for a different metric to allocate equity funding at a school level. COSLA said:

> The national PEF allocation based on free school meals data was another area which we felt could be strengthened. The data on eligibility for Free School Meals is becoming less reliable each year as the universal free school meal entitlement is expanded. [99]

143. Connect agreed that free school meals data is not reliable for calculating PEF allocation:

> It is of particular concern [therefore] that Pupil Equity Funding is calculated through free school meal uptake. Parents/carers in secondary schools are well-known not to take up their right to free school meals so this remains a completely unreliable and unhelpful yardstick for financial hardship. With the roll-out of free school meals for younger children, the statistics are also meaningless in primary schools. This issue was highlighted by some of our parent comments: 'We also only get a fraction of what is due to our school because a lot of parents who are eligible don't sign up because school meals are free for their children anyway'. [100]

144. As part of the refreshed approach to the attainment challenge, the Scottish Government switched from using SIMD to identify challenge authorities to using Children in Low Income Families data for calculating allocations of the new Strategic Equity Fund. The Scottish Government said:

> By directly measuring household income, Children in Low Income Families data provides a precise count of children impacted by poverty and therefore effectively reflects the needs of individuals in each local authority. [101]

145. The Cabinet Secretary explained that she made the decision to maintain the free school meals measurement for PEF to ensure continuity in the system:

> There were discussions and consultations about the SAC in general before I came to that decision. I am not aware of any modelling having taken place, but there were a number of discussions with stakeholders and groups that were set up specifically to look at the refresh, and continuity was an important part of PEF that I was keen to continue. [102]

146. The current PEF formula results in 3% of schools not receiving PEF. When asked about this in evidence, Education Scotland said:

> You made a point about the policy challenge around PEF and the fact that 3 per cent of schools receive no PEF. That was part of the evidence that we looked at in designing the new approach to the challenge and the new strategic equity fund, which goes to all 32 local authorities. They will be a way of helping to ensure that local authorities in those areas, which can be the most rural areas, can identify and work with their schools by using that funding to begin to look at some of the practices that they might need to take forward in relation to rural poverty and hidden poverty that the original framework for the challenge perhaps did not address in such an overt way. [103]

The Committee notes evidence that free school meals is not a reliable metric for calculating PEF allocation to schools and that this formula excludes a number of schools from receipt of PEF. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government make an early start in considering what metric it may use to determine any future allocation of school-level national funding. The Committee would welcome details of the timescales of this work and what form it will take.

Additionality

147.   Funding through the Attainment Scotland Fund is intended to be additional. That is, it should not simply displace what the school or local authority would have had in place without the funding. The Framework and new suite of guidance for PEF and SEF reiterate that funding should be used for additional purposes. The Framework states:

> This is additional resource to enhance or up-scale existing, or support new or additional, targeted approaches to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap and improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.

148.   The PEF National Operational Guidance is clear that PEF can be used for staffing, but only in connection with closing the attainment gap:

> Any staff recruited through Pupil Equity Funding should be additional to normal requirements. Where schools identify the need to recruit additional staff for an appropriate intervention or approach, they should work closely with the local authority (as the employer) to ensure that the job remits and specifications are clearly tied to the aims of the intervention or approach.

149.   The ' Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: fourth interim report' said:

> In terms of the extent to which ASF was seen as additional, there continued to be little direct evidence gathered in terms of perceptions of additionality apart from the inclusion of a specific question in the Headteacher Survey. At the school level, headteacher perceptions remain positive regarding additionality as a result of PEF resource. The great majority (89%) of headteachers viewed PEF as having provided additional resource to address the poverty-related attainment gap, broadly reflecting the 2019 survey findings.

150.   There were mixed views in evidence on the nature of the additionality required for attainment challenge spending. Clearly there is more money going into the education system for this purpose. However, the Committee heard conflicting

evidence on this point. The EIS and some teachers referred to PEF funding being used to 'plug gaps' arising from other funding cuts. [104] Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland described local authorities' use of attainment challenge money in this way as 'hidden' and 'systemic'. [105]

151.   Greg Dempster of AHDS said the difficulty is that there is no baseline against which to judge whether funding is additional:

> When the funding in a school or an authority goes down, some of the PEF might not really be additional, depending on our definition of that. It might be used to prevent a reduction in staffing or in what is offered in the school. A school that is to lose a couple of support staff because of a change in funding or policy in the authority might use PEF to retain those staff because it knows that it needs them to make a difference and that losing them would have a negative impact. [106]

152.   Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland agreed that a baseline on which to gauge additionality is needed:

> the notion of basic staffing formulas and basic minimum funding is fundamental if we are going to deliver equity in relation to the level of deprivation that exists in individual schools. [107]

153.   The EIS stated that attainment challenge funding is not the means through which essential staffing in the interests of equity should be funded:

> If the Scottish Government is serious about closing the poverty-related attainment gap (aside from tackling the root causes of poverty at source) education requires significantly more core national investment. The types of intervention that schools have been making on a piecemeal basis using PEF funding over the past 6-7 years, which have in large part sought to restore provision that used to be in place but which has been cut, require to be mainstreamed and permanently factored into core funding arrangements. [108]

154.   During the session with the Directors of Education, there was a recognition of pressures on core budgets. However, they were keen to stress that attainment fund monies delivered additionality. Ruth Binks from Inverclyde Council stated:

> We are aware of funding issues in the core, and we must ensure that core funding and additionality for schools—the entire system—work hand in hand. Attainment challenge funding is only a small part of the funding that we give to schools, but that funding has definitely been additional—and very welcome. [109]

155.   Tony McDaid from South Lanarkshire Council, responding to the quote from Greg Dempster above, indicated that it would be possible that, if the local authority had reallocated resource, a school could have made the decision under the devolved nature of PEF to maintain that resource in a school. However, he said:

> It is additionality. Priorities change, as does ensuring that your priorities are focused on the activity. It is not just about the resource; it is about your priority and focus, and ensuring that those staff or additional resources are used for the purpose of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. [110]

156. Gerry Lyons of Glasgow City Council said that they have always had a focus on improving outcomes for young people in poverty. He refers to additionality being present in schools in terms of capacity, investment in teachers and staff and their better understanding of the issues. [111]

157. The Cabinet Secretary stressed that attainment funding is additional. She highlighted the evidence from the Directors of Education that local authorities can determine their priorities and allocate the funding accordingly. The Cabinet Secretary said:

> I point to the evidence that the committee received from a director of education, who said that priorities might change within a local authority. A local authority might determine, as is absolutely its right, that priorities have changed within its area, and a headteacher could then decide that they wish to keep a service, even if a local authority has changed its priorities. As has been amply demonstrated by that director of education, those things can happen, and that is the reason why. [112]

The Committee considers that greater clarity on the level of discretion available in relation to additionality would be helpful for school leaders in determining how to spend these funds. Such clarity would also be helpful to those who ought to be part of the decision-making process at the school level, i.e. pupils, parents/carers and teachers.

Rural schools

158. The Committee heard evidence about the specific factors impacting on the poverty-related attainment gap in rural areas. The Fraser of Allander Institute referred to evidence that students from low socio-economic backgrounds that attend rural schools have experienced poorer educational mobility (where a student without tertiary-educated parents will complete tertiary education) than their urban counterparts. Rural specific factors that can affect attainment include:

- the higher cost of fuel,

- distance to school and services and

- stigma linked to being singled out in a small community. [113]

159. Rural poverty was also described by the Poverty Alliance as a significant issue affecting educational outcomes in Scotland, with the centralisation of services in rural areas, allied with limited and high-cost transport options, creating specific barriers to young people accessing training, education and employment. [114]

160. Additional costs of services and the lack of local resources (such as play therapists) in rural areas are also barriers to progress in narrowing the attainment gap in rural areas. Andrea Bradley of the EIS said:

> In many cases, the cost of interventions will be higher in rural areas. Using the same formula to direct funding to children in rural areas may be inherently flawed, because it does not take account of the additional costs of services, people or even travel if a school wants to take young people into learning experiences in environments outwith their communities. There are additional costs that may not be considered in addressing the impact of poverty in rural areas. That might be something for future funding formulas to factor in. [115]

161. Tony McDaid of South Lanarkshire Council said some of their rural schools do not get any PEF, despite there being rural poverty within the local authority area. The strategic equity fund will allow them to redirect some of that resource. [116]

162. When asked about how it is seeking to address issues with rural schools, Education Scotland acknowledged the difficulties that exist in these areas. They said that RICs have helped and online working has made collaborative working easier, describing work undertaken with the Northern Alliance RIC with a focus on rural poverty. They said that their staff understand the different challenges. However, Education Scotland did not seem able to provide the Committee with tangible examples of a bespoke approach to recognise the specific circumstances of rural schools. [117]

There is an active role for Education Scotland to make sure that the needs of rural schools are taken into account as part of the attainment challenge. The Committee was not convinced by the response from Education Scotland when asked what steps it takes to tackle the specific barriers faced by rural schools in closing the attainment gap. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government sets out how barriers to progress in rural schools will be tackled through the Framework and reports back to the Committee with proposals for ensuring that these schools have the same opportunities to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils as their urban counterparts.

Monitoring and evaluation

163. In its report 'Improving outcomes for young people through school education' in March 2021, Audit Scotland highlighted the need for clarity of purpose and outcomes:

> Given the level of resource that has been targeted through the ASF and the slow rate of improvement in attainment, if the ASF continues in some form beyond the current funding period the Scottish Government needs to be clearer about the anticipated pace of change, identify and measure against appropriate milestones, and consider the lessons about what works in determining how funding is directed.

164. A theme in evidence has been how to measure impact of interventions and outcomes of the attainment challenge. A particular challenge relates to how to capture and value more intangible outcomes, such as engagement in learning and health and wellbeing.

165. The Scottish Government has commissioned several evaluations of the Attainment Scotland Fund; the fourth evaluation interim report was published in March 2021. This set out the long-term outcomes it has measured progress against. These are:

- Embedded and sustained practices related to addressing the impact of the poverty-related attainment gap.

- All children and young people are achieving the expected or excellent educational outcomes, regardless of their background.

- An education system which is aspirational, inclusive in practice and approaches for all including teachers, parents and carers, children and young people.

- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.

166. The latest evaluation report set out the following sources of evidence for measuring outcomes:

- Administrative data (financial information);

- Challenge Authority and Schools Progress Reports;

- Local Authority Surveys;

- Headteacher Surveys and

- Quantitative data on attainment and wellbeing: Analysis of attainment measures set out in the 2020 National Improvement Framework.

167. Some of these datasets are incomplete and do not cover the full five year period being evaluated. Also, a number of data collections have been interrupted by the pandemic. Changes to SQA qualifications also makes national level comparisons over time difficult.

168. The National Improvement Framework (NIF) sets out 11 measures of the attainment gap. These are:

- 27-30 month review (children showing no concerns across all domains)

- two health and wellbeing measures: children total difficulties score at ages 4-12 and at ages 13 & 15

- four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools

- three school-leaver measures, having at least one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school, and

- 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment.

169. The Scottish Government's Implementation Framework for taking forward recommendations in the OECD report 'Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future' includes a commitment to consult on changes to the NIF measures. The consultation opened on 9 May 2022 with a view to revised measures being in place for 2023. The consultation states:

> The Scottish Government will develop a national picture of the ambition for progress across the system by aggregating the ambitious, locally identified, stretch aims for progress towards the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge set by all local authorities, in line with the Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress. In doing so, we will recognise the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's attainment, and on their health and wellbeing, and understand the scale of the challenge to recover and improve from there. The current national stretch aims set out in the 2018 National Improvement Framework will be recalibrated to take into account the impact of the pandemic, as well as the stretch aims set locally in line with the Framework.

170. The Scottish Government set out its view that it is important to retain the existing 11 key measures to maintain the consistent time series which is crucial for tracking the trends and changes in the data over time. It lists four potential additions to the NIF, which are:

   • data on the new health and wellbeing census

   • the views and priorities of staff in school and early learning settings

   • PISA and

   • engagement with children and young people.

171. The consultation refers to the tension between the need for local data to inform practice at school and local authority level and national data to inform national policy making:

> The Scottish Government recognises that national data needs to provide an accurate understanding of the wide range of learners' achievement, and support a fuller understanding of the gaps in achievement and life chances between different groups of learners and how this is captured across the full learner journey. This helps to support improvement planning at a national and local level.
>
> It is also important to recognise that, in some instances, a key tool for local authorities and schools is local data that may not be appropriate to be collected nationally. To support improvement in our education system, and deliver on the ambition of excellence and equity, decision-makers at all levels need to gain a better understanding of what good teaching is, and how it leads to better learning in schools.

172. The Scottish Government is in discussion with local government colleagues on the consultation on the NIF measures, because local authorities use some NIF measures but also use some of their own measures. Graeme Logan of the Scottish Government said:

> We are particularly keen to look at a local government benchmarking tool to make sure that there is consistency in the measures that we are all using when talking about improvement. [118]

173. Under the PEF Guidance, plans for using the funding should outline clear outcomes to be achieved and how progress towards these, and the impact on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, will be measured. Schools must also make plans for the use of PEF accessible to stakeholders and provide clarity on how it is being used and its expected impact.

174. The Framework suggests that local authorities, school leaders and Education Scotland would use available data and the Scottish Attainment Challenge logic model to explore a shared understanding of the local context to support the setting of ambitious stretch aims; they should also monitor performance and progress towards achieving these stretch aims.

175. The Framework notes that additional national measures reflecting wider poverty-related and health and wellbeing issues will need to be developed and agreed for future versions of the Framework from the start of the school year 2023-24. It is possible that any future national measure will reflect local authorities' stretch health and wellbeing aims if agreement on how to measure this emerges through these processes. It sets out the 'core plus' model which is to be adopted:

> In the first instance a 'core plus' model is expected, with the 'core' setting a minimum expectation for aims measurable by the National Improvement Framework key measures and local data for health and wellbeing; and the 'plus' reflecting additional local priorities. Additional national measures reflecting wider poverty-related and health and wellbeing issues will need to be developed and agreed for future versions of the Framework from the start of the school year 2023-24.

176. The Framework sets out monitoring and accountability processes. These will include:

- schools will explicitly report on the impact on outcomes for learners impacted by poverty to parent councils and their parent forum.

- Scottish Government and Education Scotland will sample these reports annually to continue to inform their understanding of the approaches to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap.

- on-going and regular dialogue between local authorities and Education Scotland.

- Local authorities' local education quality and improvement reports should include specific information on how SAC funds are delivering on the agreed aims. These reports will be shared with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

Evaluating interventions

177. A theme in evidence was the difficulty in making a direct correlation between attainment fund spending and progress towards closing the attainment gap. The complexity of the impact of poverty means that no one intervention is likely to improve attainment. Education Scotland's recently published ' Pupil Equity Funding: Looking inwards, outwards, forwards' highlights this:

> All local authorities report that PEF is contributing to improving outcomes for children and young people experiencing poverty. However, several pointed out that it was difficult to attribute improvements to PEF alone.

178. The Scottish Government's fourth evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund also noted the complexity of measuring outcomes in this area:

> it remains difficult to assess the reasons behind any observed improvement in attainment or closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and whether these changes have occurred as a direct result of the fund.

179. In evidence, third sector organisations described many practical measures they provide to families dealing with poverty but said that it is very difficult to draw a line between what they do and improvements in attainment. Jim Wallace of Aberlour said:

> We need to establish clear measures of success. As an example, we could talk about the work that we are doing in Dundee. We have worked with 60 per cent of the children in one primary school there, and there is good feedback on what we are doing, but does that help to narrow the attainment gap overall? I am not so sure about that. We need to establish real, strong measures. [119]

180. Jim Thewliss from School Leaders Scotland agreed that more could be done to ensure that ASF funded projects were evaluated. However, he welcomed the stretch aims as being 'very useful in taking schools from where they are in the process to another place and moving forward from there'. [120]

181. The Child Poverty Action Group would like links to be made between measures which improve participation and attainment:

> Many schools use PEF to ensure that children and young people on low incomes are able to participate in the same way as their peers – examples include uniform provision, trip subsidies and free wider achievement opportunities. However, there can still be reluctance or uncertainty around spending PEF on 'just' covering costs for children and young people on low incomes when it will be difficult or impossible to prove direct impact on attendance or attainment. [121]

182. Barnardo's Scotland would also like more recognition of the 'soft' impacts of support provided through the attainment challenge, such as increased attendance and sustaining friendships. Areas for measurement they would also like to strengthen include trying to capture what has been prevented, e.g. school exclusions, referrals to social work, CAMHS and the Children's Reporter. [122]

Transparency and a national picture

183. The Committee heard evidence that it is challenging to get an overall picture of the effectiveness of the attainment challenge spend when it is so disaggregated. Jim Wallace of Aberlour said:

> It was decided that decision making should be put in the schools, with the headteacher having the power to choose the best way of spending the money. However, what we really want to know is how things are being affected at a macro level. There is, for me, a wee governance loop that is missing. [123]

184. The Poverty Alliance also expressed concern about a lack of robust evidence and information at national level on schools' use of their allocated funding. [124] Louise Goodlad of the Prince's Trust highlighted a lack of transparency and clarity about where the funding has gone and what impact it has had:

> I would like more transparency and clarity about where the funding has gone and what impact it has had. I would caveat that by saying that that information might well be out there somewhere but, if it is, it is not easy to find. If it is out there, it should be made easier to find so that we are really clear about what works and what is having an impact. [125]

185. The core stretch aims will include measures for overall progress and reducing the poverty-related gaps in ACEL data, school leaver attainment and 16-19 participation measures. The Framework states that these will be aggregated so that a national picture for progress on the poverty-related attainment gap can be identified. [126]

Role of schools in evaluation

186. The Framework envisages evaluation carried out 'by schools for schools'. Teachers stressed the importance of gathering data at school level. They told Members about a local authority wide dashboard through which teachers and other staff could access data across all schools in the area. One teacher was keen to stress that this data told a story about each individual child and was not 'just numbers'. Being able to track data over a longer period of time was valued by many teachers who spoke to Members. [127] Several teachers detailed their experiences of tracking attainment in their own classrooms, allowing them to reflect on the success of their practices in relation to closing the attainment gap. [128]

187. Emma Congreve from the Fraser of Allander Institute suggested that developing the capacity within schools to evaluate interventions is important but complex. She particularly highlighted that interventions should be compared to other possible alternative approaches:

> That is not just about gathering metrics on a programme in isolation; it is also about benchmarking with other programmes and constructing control groups that allow you to get into the detail of what is happening and what is succeeding for pupils. That has a resource dimension; it is expensive to do that sort of thing well, and in the current climate it will be difficult to carve money out for that purpose. In the long run, however, such an approach is incredibly important for building on success. [129]

188. NASUWT described the evaluation process to date as being 'very top down'. As PEF is spent at the discretion of the headteacher, they argued that using headteacher responses to identify case studies does not provide a robust quality assurance check:

> Teacher views need to be sought directly, not only to provide that check and balance, but also to provide the best evidence of whether the funding has made any significant improvement to the classroom experience. [130]

189. Attainment Advisor, Elizabeth Somerville said that the stretch aims will help provide focus on effective interventions:

> It is not always about shiny new things, and local authorities are not pushing them. They are pushing the recovery, and that is where our stretch aims will come in by allowing teachers to focus on the things that they know work well for them so that they can make the difference. [131]

190. Mark Ratter of East Renfrewshire Council spoke of investment that has been made in upskilling how schools, teachers and the system more widely use data, including a focus on tracking individual children and young people. [132] Ruth Binks of Inverclyde Council referred to teams of headteachers across the local authority sharing data and working together on their improvement journey. [133]

191. However, Education Scotland told the Committee that there is not a coherent model for gathering data and referred to data being captured on a variety of different systems:

> Fantastic work on tracking and monitoring is on the go. A lot of it is on individual systems. It is not a coherent model in that everybody is using their own packages. Some are commercially bought, some of that work is done through the national SEEMiS system, some is on the Insight system and, in other cases, the school has developed its own package. [134]

192. There is a tension between reporting outcomes of the attainment challenge and allowing teachers to spend their time delivering the interventions; in-depth reporting of outcomes can be time-consuming and onerous. The EIS referred to 'death by spreadsheet' and said that it is felt in some cases that tracking and monitoring is disproportionate and burdensome. [135] NASUWT agreed that the onus and workload associated with facilitating transparency must lie with the Scottish Government and local authorities, not schools and teachers. [136]

Wider measures

193. The focus of the Scottish Attainment Challenge is threefold: literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing. This reflects the structure of broad general education, which highlights these three areas as being the responsibility of all staff that should be mainstreamed throughout the learning experience. These three areas have been described as fundamental to learning and accessing the curriculum. The revised PEF guidance states that interventions should focus on all three areas.

194. In evidence, teaching unions said that the focus on attainment was too narrow and highlighted the need to look at the holistic development of young people. [137] This is consistent with the Audit Scotland report:

> An emphasis on measures of attainment in exams, while important, fails to recognise and promote the broader aims of CfE and value the wider achievements of young people.

195. Jim Thewliss of School Leavers Scotland echoed this sentiment. He said:

> I would suggest that attainment is too narrow a focus, yes, particularly when we start to look at health and wellbeing, how young people learn within the school environment and how they exist within the local environment outwith school. If we are going to start to engage, as I think we must, with the local community and its support for and input to school, to start to look at the holistic development of young people, the focus on attainment is too narrow. It is the easy one, and I suppose that, in starting this, you start with what is easy and doable. We are now starting to move into the more challenging areas, and it is right and proper that we start to understand just exactly how the three capacities in curriculum for excellence that we have not looked at can start to be unwound a bit in relation to the way that the school environment operates within the local circumstances in which it exists. [138]

196. Teachers agreed that there is a case for measuring achievement as well as attainment. They acknowledged that achievement is difficult to quantify and measure but felt that it is equally as important as attainment. There was a strong consensus that there is a need to find a way of celebrating and capturing achievements that are not necessarily academic. One teacher said that the poverty-related attainment gap is about creating the rounded citizen, not just focusing on literacy and numeracy. [139]

197. Education Scotland said that they are 'grappling' with complex measurements in relation to health and wellbeing, and that attainment advisors are working on a number of measures to help schools to track health and wellbeing issues. Elizabeth Sommerville, attainment advisor, described working with schools and local authorities on this:

> It is our job not just to consider the wellbeing of learners but to recognise that families' wellbeing can also have a direct impact on the child. All local authorities need different measures around that, because the barriers and challenges that they face are very different. Part of the refresh will give authorities the opportunity to allow people to have that bespoke measure of success, and to do that really well. It will allow them to make that difference for the children they are working with. [140]

198. When questioned on the matter, Gerry Lyons of Glasgow City Council agreed that a dashboard of measures is needed to celebrate wider achievement; he argued for a wider focus across curricular areas:

> We need to focus on achievement, attainment and positive destinations and find some way of celebrating health and wellbeing. However, I am not sure what that would look like, so we should commission someone to get that right. [141]

199. The Poverty Alliance said that research on nurture groups has demonstrated positive impacts on social, emotional and behavioural outcomes for children. However, they agreed that the impact on attainment needs robust evaluation. [142]

200. However, Professor Francis of the Education Endowment Foundation highlighted the importance of attainment as the primary measure and stressed that literacy and numeracy as foundational platforms for learning:

> The Education Endowment Foundation is primarily focused on the attainment gap, but that is for good reason. Attainment is the key predictor of pupil life outcomes. That is well evidenced, particularly for maths and English outcomes. Although none of us would disagree that the curriculum should be broad and balanced and although pupil experience is important and supports attainment, the job of schools is to promote capability and knowledge in the curriculum and ensure that pupils gain that capability and knowledge. Therefore, it is right that we publicly measure those outcomes to see what value we gain from the school system. [143]

201. The Committee heard evidence of the danger of interventions being driven by the ease with which they can be measured. Professor Ainscow of the University of Glasgow drew the distinction between the goal of the policy to support equity in education and the measurement of the policy:

> The danger that we fall into is that we confuse the goals of what we are trying to do with our ways of monitoring it. The two things must connect, but they are separate. We need to monitor the impact on attainment across the system, but the goal should not be to look for quick fixes, which does not change achievement. [144]

202. Equally, the EIS warned of accountability drives where schools invest money in initiatives with easily measurable outcomes rather than areas for which outcomes are more challenging to measure. They believe that a review of relevant qualitative data should be considered; however, such data takes longer to gather and is less easily abbreviated into a set of statistics. [145] Barnardo's Scotland highlighted that health and wellbeing measures are not always given equal weighting and also highlighted a risk that 'we prioritise measurement of what we can count rather than what makes the biggest difference.' [146]

Stretch aims

203. When asked about when the attainment gap will be closed, the Cabinet Secretary said:

> I will not set an arbitrary date for when the attainment gap will be closed, particularly so close to the experiences that we are still having with the pandemic. We know that the pandemic has had an impact on attainment but, through the stretch aims and working with local authorities, we intend that they will be able to determine what can be done in their areas and what support is required from our national agencies. [147]

204. There was some confusion following that evidence session about whether closing the attainment gap is still a Scottish Government commitment. On 9 June, the First Minister was asked in First Minister's Question Time to clarify the position; the First Minister said:

> Let me quote the manifesto commitment at the 2016 election, which said that the Scottish Government would support the substantial closure of the attainment gap by 2026. I stand by that. That remains the policy and the objective of the Government. [148]

205. In a follow up letter, the Cabinet Secretary confirmed the position:

> without underplaying the challenges both the pandemic and cost of living crisis present, I expect to see significant progress in closing the poverty related attainment gap during this parliamentary session. The 2016/17 Programme for Government made clear our commitment to closing the poverty related attainment gap and to "substantially eliminate" it over the course of the decade since then. Nothing has changed and whilst this remains a complex and long term endeavour, I am fully committed to that ambition and to making more progress, faster.

206. The Cabinet Secretary confirmed that it is the defining mission of the Scottish Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. [149] The Scottish Government has explicitly said that stretch aims are not targets, but challenging ambitions to which those who are delivering improvement can aspire. [150] The Cabinet Secretary referred to the Audit Scotland report which called reducing the poverty-related attainment gap a complex challenge and said that it will take time:

> our ambition is no less than to close the attainment gap, but we need to recognise that that is a long-term endeavour. [151]

207. The Cabinet Secretary said that, rather than a top-down approach, the Scottish Government is working in partnership with local authorities so that they can set the aims that are correct for their areas:

> it will be measurable once the local authorities have developed their stretch aims, and my understanding is that they will be developed by September, for the new academic year. They are very accountable, and they will be obvious and measurable—we will be able to measure progress. [152]

208. Asked whether the stretch aims will be published, the Cabinet Secretary said:

> I am clear that we need more transparency in the area. As a national Government, we have listened to what Audit Scotland has said. Once the data is in a state that can be published and once we have collated all the data from the local authorities, absolutely, I see no reason not to publish. I would, of course, expect local authorities to publish the data as and when they set their stretch aims, because that is part of their local improvement work. There should not be a secretive manner of development at local or national level. We will absolutely make sure that material is published to allow people to see what is happening locally and at a national level. [153]

Monitoring and evaluation - conclusions

Closing the attainment gap is a complex endeavour. The Committee notes the plan for stretch aims to be set at local authority level and for this to be aggregated into national targets. The Committee seeks assurances from the Scottish Government that there will be sufficient challenge in this process to ensure that both local and national targets are ambitious and that appropriate milestones are set. The Committee also asks the Scottish Government to set out how robust national data will be produced on outcomes when local authorities may use different metrics within the 'core-plus' model of setting stretch aims.

The Committee heard evidence that it can be challenging to attribute an improvement in attainment to specific interventions. The Committee is concerned that this makes measuring outcomes from the large investment in the attainment challenge difficult. The Committee notes the work ongoing in improving measurement of outcomes and considers that this work is vital to enable the impact of the attainment challenge to be properly measured. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland is tasked with ensuring that every local authority has access to relevant external expertise to enable them to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

The Committee heard in evidence that there is a lack of transparency and accessibility to data on the outcomes of the attainment challenge. The Committee notes that the Scottish Government publishes a National Improvement Framework Evidence Report which provides data on education performance and closing the attainment gap nationally and at a local authority level. The Committee would welcome details of how the Scottish Government will present this data alongside local stretch aims and how parents/carers will be supported to use this tool to better understand their local authority's performance.

Role of the HM Inspectorate of Education

209.   The Committee heard evidence about the role of HM Inspectorate of Education in monitoring the effectiveness of the attainment challenge. The Framework states that HM Inspectors will inspect the effectiveness of the arrangements to accelerate progress on improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty:

>   They will gather and share evidence of what is working well and where further development is needed. Evidence from inspection activity will also be used to help leaders and practitioners to build their own capacity to improve.

210.   Professor Ainscow of the University of Glasgow highlighted the importance of the inspection system in monitoring progress on attainment. He said that evaluation carried out 'by schools for schools' requires accountability and an inspection service that is recognised as being independent:

>   A secondary head who took over two or three years ago said that his school had not been inspected for 10 years. The first thing that he did was look at the data on attendance and exclusions. It was a disaster, but nobody had been looking at it. Somebody has to keep an eye on that and step in. [154]

There is an opportunity with the forthcoming education reforms to ensure that the schools inspectorate plays a full role in monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation of plans to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The Committee believes it is essential that this is factored into the design of the new education agencies, which is currently ongoing.

Longitudinal study

211. The Committee wanted to explore the possibility of monitoring the long-term impact of the attainment challenge on children and young people. Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland suggested that longitudinal studies should take place to understand the impacts of interventions in the longer term. This could encompass two approaches: one to follow a cohort of young people and the other to look at the long-term impact of strategies that are being put into schools. [155] Emma Congreve of the Fraser of Allander Institute agreed with the need to monitor outcomes throughout the years:

> As far as I am aware, no dedicated resource has been allocated to robustly monitoring and evaluating the schemes that are going on. We are not talking about initiatives in isolation; we are also talking about how they build on each other. Work in early years feeds into interventions at primary school and beyond. A longitudinal approach to that would be really helpful. [156]

212. Andrea Bradley of the EIS said that a longitudinal study could be carried out by Education Scotland, the inspectorate or by independent academic research. Mike Corbett of NASUWT favoured external independent research:

> Like others, I certainly would not be rushing to give the work to Education Scotland or the current inspection regime. We need to see what the newer regimes look like before we can be confident in saying that we trust them with that work. [157]

213. Asked whether a longitudinal study should be carried out, Patricia Watson of Education Scotland said that consideration would have to be given to what it would add to evidence that is already being gathered and to how the results would be used:

> The attainment Scotland fund evaluation is a longitudinal study of the impact of the Scottish attainment challenge. We do a headteacher survey and a local authority survey each year, and we build up a picture of the impact in terms of what happens on the ground.

214. However, Patricia Watson saw merit in a case studies in which individual learners are followed and tracked:

> We currently do that through attainment data, and there is the potential to do it better. [158]

215. Education Scotland said it would be the agency to carry out such a study, along with academic institutions, local authorities and the Scottish Government's analytical services. They could undertake this work if it was considered to be a strategic priority. [159]

216. The Cabinet Secretary said that she would be happy to consider the question of a longitudinal study further, including whether it would be worthwhile and the impact on teachers' workload. She said that overall responsibility for evaluation sits with the Scottish Government, but Education Scotland play an important role. [160]

Given the size of the budget and scale of ambition, it is vital that the long-term impact of the attainment challenge funding is measured. Evaluating what types of interventions and policy approaches create better outcomes in the long-run is a vital part of any policy approach, be that at a local or national level. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government commissions a longitudinal study into the impact of the attainment challenge policy. The study should cover the impact of the policy at a national, regional and school level.

Positive destinations

217. Ensuring that young people move into positive destinations after leaving school is of vital importance. The Committee was keen to explore the impact of poverty on post-school destinations as part of this inquiry.

218. One of the core stretch aims set out in the Framework is overall progress and reducing the poverty-related gap in the proportion of 16-19 olds participating in education, employment or training based on the Annual Participation Measure (APM) produced by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). The Scottish Government describes this as 'an indicator of school success in preparing young people for access to future work or study.' The Cabinet Secretary said that Scotland has a 'record high' proportion of school leavers entering positive destinations upon leaving school. [161] In a follow up letter, the Cabinet Secretary set out the current APM data for positive destinations:

> This measure shows that the proportion of 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment has been improving since 2017, from 91.1 percent in 2017 to 92.2 percent in 2021. The gap between the proportion of 16-19 year olds in the most and least deprived areas participating in education, training, and employment has narrowed from 11.5 percentage points to 9.3 percentage points over the same period. This narrowing of the gap is due to the proportion of 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment increasing by 2.3 percentage points for those in the most deprived areas, whilst remaining largely unchanged for those from the least deprived areas.
>
> As the Committee also noted, more school leavers in Scotland are in education, employment or training 3 months after the end of the school year: 95.5% in 2020/21 compared to 93.3% in 2019/20 and a record high since consistent records began in 2009/10.

219. Education Scotland said that a lot of work is being done on participation beyond school but admitted that there is more work to do to ensure that positive destinations are on-going, stating that that young people who live in the areas of highest deprivation are less likely to sustain a positive destination. [162]

220. In follow up information, Education Scotland confirmed that young people's participation in positive destinations beyond school is measured through the Annual Participation Measure; through this measure each young person from the age of 16 is counted/tracked annually in every subsequent year until they reach age 19. It therefore allows for a degree of longitudinal tracking. Education Scotland said that

this data allows for intervention planning when a young person's circumstances change and they are no longer in a positive destination. However, they reflected the limitations of this system:

> SDS undertake (in partnership through Opportunities for All) tracking of progress of 16-19 year olds, and for publishing the APM based on the data they hold. It is possible to track cohorts through the use of APM, to a certain extent. However, there are limitations in the system as it does not fully reflect changes in address e.g. where a young person relocates to another local authority area. The use of the system also varies across the country, albeit there is increasing dialogue with school/local authority staff, college/university and SDS to consider circumstances in each locality.

221.   In considering what interventions lead to positive destinations for young people leaving school, Gerry Lyons of Glasgow City Council emphasised the importance of the whole journey through school:

> It might be worth considering the fact that you do not get positive destinations if you do not have a really good three to-18 journey, so the work of our early years centres and primary schools is also part of the celebration of positive destinations. [163]

222.   Colleges Scotland stated that college is the most popular destination for those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds with 38% of school leavers from SIMD20 moving into further education. They argued that attainment challenge funding should be allocated to colleges as the impact of poverty continues to be evident in post-school education, particularly covering SCQF Level 1-6 courses. [164]

223.   Universities Scotland stressed the impact of the attainment gap on entrance to university:

> One of the challenges for universities in addressing fair access issues is the attainment gap in schools. Universities have implemented contextual admissions and minimum entry requirements linked to socio-economic disadvantage (as introduced in 2019) to recognise that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may not demonstrate their full potential through school-level qualifications. However, applicants still need to meet these minimum requirements to demonstrate that they will thrive in higher education and get an offer to study at university. The stubborn nature of the attainment gap suggests that there are still learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not able to realise their full potential at school.

224.   Universities Scotland also highlighted that there is to be a change of Commissioner on Widening Access (whose remit does allow scope to consider schools) in 2022, as the incumbent steps down from the role. They see this as an opportunity to refresh the scope of the role, empowering the Commissioner to go further to take an entire overview across the education ecosystem, from school through to university. [165]

The Committee welcomes the good work being carried out by teachers, schools and local authorities to assist young people in finding positive destinations on leaving school.[ii] The Committee notes the evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education

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[ii] There was a division on adding additional words to this sentence. See Annexe B, Minute

and Skills on the narrowing of the gap between young people from the most and least deprived areas participating in education, training, and employment on leaving school. There were mixed views in the Committee regarding the value of positive destinations as they are currently defined. The Committee did not examine the details of the types of destinations being counted under this measurement as part of this inquiry.

The Committee believes that it is important to consider outcomes of the attainment challenge in terms of sustainable post-16 positive destinations and the life long learning agenda. The Committee notes evidence that the use of the system varies across the country and the current measure of positive destinations is not always capable of following a young person when their location changes. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland takes steps to address these issues so that the long-term sustainability of positive destinations can be fully tracked and measured.

Accountability

225.   There are many players in delivering the attainment challenge: local authorities, RICs, headteachers, teachers, parents, carers, community partners, central government and government agencies. During this inquiry, the Committee was keen to establish where accountability lies. When asked about this, the Cabinet Secretary said:

> National accountability is very important, but I hope that there will also be an ability to have local accountability for the stretch aims and for what happens in local authorities, with discussion at any time, whether that is through the committee, through elections or whatever. It is important to have that accountability at different levels. However, at the national level, it sits with me. [166]

226.   The Framework sets out the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of the range of key stakeholders engaged in education/school improvement, including reducing the poverty-related attainment gap; it says:

> The Scottish Attainment Challenge mission is central to all of Education Scotland's work supporting Scottish educators. To support this all teams will review and enhance approaches to professional learning and leadership and provision of professional advice and support in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. They will lead improvement and build capacity, share practice and broker connections with partners. Working collaboratively with local authorities and stakeholders, staff will support the identification of any gaps in service provision and provide support, where required, to address these.

227.   The role of Education Scotland is key in bringing together the different actors in the system and leading them towards the goal of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. However, some teachers described the central narrative as unhelpful and said that research carried out centrally does not always support practice on the ground.

of the Meeting of 29 June 2022, and note on 'Record of division in private' for more detail.

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228. A similar disconnect was highlighted in Professor Ken Muir's report on education reform:

> it was suggested that the model by which teachers and practitioners seek support from education bodies on the basis of a predetermined offer is often unhelpful and flawed. It was suggested a better approach would be for teachers and practitioners to be able to make more bespoke requests related to their needs and have that request met in a timely fashion.

229. Professor Muir's report recommended the creation of a new education agency. The report said that the Scottish Government should establish a transitions programme team to oversee the changes and reforms envisaged in the report and that the transition programme should be taken forward in partnership with the bodies subject to reform and all those that are impacted by its outcomes.

230. When asked about the imminent changes coming as a result of Professor Muir's report and the creation of a new education agency, Patricia Watson of Education Scotland said:

> In terms of capacity, we now know—at least, we are led to believe—from the cabinet secretary's response to Professor Muir's report that we will have at least two years before the organisation changes. Therefore, as far as we are concerned, it is business as usual in Education Scotland for the next two years, and the cabinet secretary has been very supportive of that, too.
>
> We have a team of 32 attainment advisers and a strong team of curriculum staff; we are continuing to recruit and fill posts in the normal way when vacancies arise; and we continue to work in partnership with the local authorities and schools that we serve. Therefore, we are really not worried—for the short term, anyway. [168]

Education Scotland has a key role in the Framework to provide challenge and support to local authorities, headteachers and classroom teachers. Given the number of stakeholders involved in delivering the attainment challenge, it is crucial that the education agency takes ownership and demonstrates accountability for outcomes. This must be incorporated into the design of the new education agency.

Annex A - Written Evidence and engagement

Written evidence received in response to the Committee's call for views can be found here.

The Committee has also held informal engagement sessions with:

- children at Sidlaw View Primary School, Dundee;

- care experienced young people;

- young people supported by Barnardo's Scotland in Greenock;

- West Partnership RIC teachers at St Roch's High School in Glasgow;

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- West Partnership RIC teachers online and

- parents and carers from within the West Partnership RIC.

Annexe B - Minutes of Meetings

Extracts from the minutes of meetings of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

10th Meeting, Wednesday 24 November 2021

Work programme (in private): The Committee considered its work programme and agreed its approach to its Scottish Attainment Challenge inquiry.

5th Meeting, Wednesday 9 February 2022

2 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Professor Mel Ainscow, Professor in Education, University of Glasgow;

Dr Laura Robertson, Senior Research Officer, The Poverty Alliance;

Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation;

Emma Congreve, Knowledge Exchange Fellow, Fraser of Allander Institute.

4 Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 2.

6th Meeting Wednesday 23 February 2022

2 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Jim Wallace, Director of Children and Families, Aberlour Child Care Trust;

Maureen McAteer, Assistant Director, Barnardo's Scotland;

Sara Spencer, Cost of the School Day Project Manager, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland;

Louise Goodlad, Senior Head of Partnerships – Scotland, The Prince's Trust Scotland.

3 Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 2.

11th Meeting , Wednesday 20 April 2022

2 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Jim Thewliss, General Secretary, School Leaders Scotland;

Mike Corbett, National Official (Scotland), NASUWT;

Andrea Bradley, Assistant Secretary, Education and Equality, Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS);

Greg Dempster, General Secretary, Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland (AHDS).

5 Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee deferred consideration of the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 2 to a later meeting.

12th Meeting, Wednesday 4 May 2022

1 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Ruth Binks, Director of Education, Communities & Organisational Development, Inverclyde Council;

Gerry Lyons, Head of Education, Glasgow City Council;

Tony McDaid, Executive Director of Education Resources, South Lanarkshire Council;

Mark Ratter, Director of Education, East Renfrewshire Council.

Stephanie Callaghan declared that she is a Councillor in South Lanarkshire.

3 Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 1

13th Meeting, Wednesday 11 May 2022

1 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—

Patricia Watson, Strategic Director,

Craig Clement, Strategic Director,

Pamela Di Nardo, Senior Regional Adviser and

Elizabeth Sommerville, Attainment Advisor, Education Scotland .

2 Evidence Session (In Private)

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda item 1.

14th Meeting, Wednesday 18 May 2022

1 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry:

The Committee heard evidence from—Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and Graeme Logan, Director of Learning, Scottish Government.

3 Evidence Session (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence it heard earlier under agenda items 1 and 2.

17th Meeting, Wednesday 8 June 2022

4 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry (In Private):

The Committee considered the evidence heard and issues for inclusion in its draft report.

19th Meeting, Wednesday 22 June 2022

1 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry (In Private):

The Committee considered a draft report for its Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry and agreed to consider an amended draft report at its next meeting.

20th Meeting, Wednesday 29 June 2022

2 Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry (In Private):

The Committee continued consideration of a draft report. One change was proposed and decided upon (by division) and the Committee agreed its report.

Record of division in private

Bob Doris proposed adding to the recommendation following paragraph 224, after "on leaving school", the following words: "and acknowledges the record high level of positive destinations."

The proposal was disagreed to by division: For 1 (Bob Doris), Against 9 (Stephanie Callaghan, Graeme Dey, Ross Greer, Ruth Maguire, Michael Marra, Oliver Mundell, Willie Rennie, Kaukab Stewart, Sue Webber), Abstentions 0.

1   Note of meeting with teachers

2   Note of meeting with teachers

3   Note of meeting with teachers

4   Child Poverty Action Group, written evidence

5   Official Report, 9 Feb 2022, col 22

6   Audit Scotland: Improving outcomes for young people through school education

7   Audit Scotland: Improving outcomes for young people through school education

8   Poverty Alliance, written evidence

9   Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, written evidence

10 SPICe briefing for Education, Children and Young People meeting on 9 February 2022, page 22

11 Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 11 and 41

12 Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 11

13 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 2

14 Official Report, 4 May 2022, cols 16-17

15 Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 2, 34-35

16 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 8

17 Poverty Alliance, written evidence

18 Note of meeting with teachers

19 Note of meeting with teachers

20 Note of meeting with teachers and Note of meeting with teachers

21 Official Report, 20 April 2022, cols 38 and 41

22 NSPCC, written evidence

23 Official Report, 9 Feb 2022, col 21

24 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 7

25 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 36

26 Official Report, 11 May, col 10

27 SPICe briefing for Education, Children and Young People meeting, 18 May 2022

28 SPICe briefing for Education, Children and Young People meeting, 18 May 2022

29 COSLA, written evidence

30 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 24

31 Scottish Attainment Challenge 2022/2023 – 2025 to 2026: Fairer Scotland Duty summary

32 Pupil attainment: closing the gap - Schools

33 COSLA, written evidence

34 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 34

35 EIS, written evidence and Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 31

36 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 22

37 Note of meeting with teachers

38 Note of meeting with teachers

39 Note of meeting with teachers

40 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 11

41 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 12-13

42 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 33

43 Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 47

44 Official Report 4 May 2022, cols 8 and 9

45 Official Report 4 May 2022, col 7

46 Official Report 4 May 2022, Col 13

47 Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 45

48 Official Report, 18 May 2022, cols 3, 19 and 21

49 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 21

50 https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/

51 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 5

52 COSLA, written evidence

53 University of Glasgow, Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, written evidence

54 Official Report, 20 April 2022, cols 14 and 16

55 Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 8

56 Official Report, 9 February 2022, cols 9 and 27

57   Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 16

58   Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 11

59   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 17

60   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 17

61   Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 9

62   Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 41

63   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 18

64   Note of meeting with teachers

65   Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 33

66   Note of meeting with teachers and Note of meeting with teachers

67   EIS, written evidence

68   Official Report, 20 April 2022, cols 5 & 11

69   Note of meeting with parents

70   Connect, written evidence

71   Child Poverty Action Group, written evidence

72   EIS, Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 3 and NASUWT, written evidence

73   Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 18

74   Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 34-35

75   Official Report, 18 May 2022, cols 29-30

76   Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 32

77   Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 14 & 18

78   SPICe briefing for ECYPC meeting, 18 May 2022

79   Official Report, 18 Mat 2022, col 30

80   Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 15

81   COSLA, written evidence

82   Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 26

83   Official Report, 23 February 2022, col 13

84   Note of meeting with teachers

85   Note of meeting with teachers

86   Save the Children, written evidence

87   Official Report 9 February 2022, col 36

88   Barnardo's Scotland, written evidence

89   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 15

90   Child Poverty Action Group, written evidence

91   Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021

92   2020 Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation: Headteacher Survey

93   Barnardo's Scotland, written evidence

94   Robertson Trust, written evidence

95   Prince's Trust Scotland, written evidence

96   Official Report, 23 February 2022, col 23

97   Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: Fourth interim report - year 5, Scottish Government

98   Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 10

99   COSLA, written evidence

100 Connect, written evidence

101 Strategic Equity Fund, National Operational Guidance 2022

102 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 27

103 Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 44

104 EIS, written evidence and Note of meeting with teachers

105 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 16

106 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 15

107 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 19

108 EIS, written evidence

109 Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 2

110 Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 4

111 Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 12

112 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 17

113 Fraser of Allander Institute, written evidence

114   Poverty Alliance, written evidence

115   Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 18

116   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 13

117   Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 41-44 and cols 48-49

118   Official Report, 18 May 2022, cols 23-24

119   Official report, 23 February 2022, cols 16-17

120   Official Report, 20 April 2022, cols 5 and 24

121   Child Poverty Action Group, written evidence

122   Barnardo's Scotland, written evidence

123   Official Report, 23 February 2022, col 40

124   Official Report, 9 February 2022, col 12

125   Official Report, 23 February 2022, col 38

126   The Framework

127   Note of meeting with teachers

128   Note of meeting with teachers

129   Official Report 9 February 2022, col 19

130   NASUWT, written evidence

131   Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 24

132   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 16

133   Official Report, 4 May 2022, cols 30-31

134   Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 40

135   EIS, written evidence

136   NASUWT, written evidence

137   Official Report, 20 April 2022, cols 7 and 27

138   Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 7

139   Note of meeting with teachers

140   Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 3 to 5

141   Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 40

142   Poverty Alliance, written evidence

143 Official Report, 9 February 2022, cols 16 and 23

144 Official Report 9 February 2022, col 3

145 EIS, written evidence

146 Barnardo's Scotland, written evidence

147 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 4

148 Scottish Parliament, Official Report, 9 June 2022, col 23

149 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 14

150 2021 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan

151 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 4

152 Official Report, 18 May 2022, cols 4 & 5

153 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 5

154 Official Report 9 February 2022, cols 9 and 35 and written evidence

155 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 21

156 Official Report 9 February 2022, cols 30-31

157 Official Report, 20 April 2022, col 30

158 Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 25

159 Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 26 & 27

160 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 31

161 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 13

162 Official Report, 11 May 2022, cols 36 and 38

163 Official Report, 4 May 2022, col 40

164 Colleges Scotland, written evidence

165 Universities Scotland, written evidence

166 Official Report, 18 May 2022, col 32

167 Note of meeting with teachers

168 Official Report, 11 May 2022, col 15