



Education
Scotland
Foghlam Alba

For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators

Addressing the poverty-related attainment gap



Introduction

The Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) was launched in February 2015 with the strategic aim of ‘closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities’. The £750 million Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) follows the duration of the SAC over the course of this Parliament, prioritising improvements in literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing of those children and young people adversely affected by poverty in Scotland’s schools. Achieving excellence and equity in education are the key aims.

This publication forms part of our national thematic inspection reports. Through these reports HM Inspectors of Education share their professional view on particular aspects of education.

This report draws on a range of evidence gathered across 433 inspections of early learning and childcare settings, primary, secondary and special schools carried out during 2018-2020. It focuses on what is working consistently well, what is improving and where there remain challenges and areas for improvement in addressing the poverty-related attainment gap in schools. In Scotland, scrutiny activity is a crucial tool which supports improvement, as well as providing assurance and public accountability. The scope of our inspection activities at a local level gives us a unique evidence base drawn from observing practice at first hand across the country.

As well as sharing our key messages about current practice in addressing the poverty-related attainment gap, it contains illustrations of schools and local authorities which demonstrate highly-effective practice to promote reflection and improvement at a local and national level.



Summary findings

Senior leaders across most sectors continue to ensure a strong focus on raising attainment and addressing the poverty-related attainment gap. Overall, schools have gained confidence and knowledge in identifying the poverty-related attainment gap in their local context. Increasingly, staff across sectors recognise the importance of knowing the circumstances of individual children and young people and overcoming any barriers to their progress in learning.

A stronger focus on identifying and addressing barriers to learning is helping through targeted approaches to improve literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing. Emerging evidence indicates that these targeted interventions are leading to improved outcomes for children and young people with barriers to their learning resulting from their socio-economic circumstances. However, more work needs to be done by schools in gathering and taking account of a range of data and evidence to monitor and evaluate the impact of change and improvement on outcomes for learners.

The quality of leadership of addressing the poverty-related attainment gap in early years settings and in special schools is too variable. Clearer strategic direction and an increased pace of continuous improvement is required in these sectors.



The photographs used in this report were taken before Covid-19 restrictions were in place.

What is working consistently well?

Leadership focus on excellence and equity

Schools have a clear and strong understanding of the vision for education in Scotland set out by Scottish Government; namely to achieve excellence and equity. Almost all schools take good account of the National Improvement Framework (NIF) priorities and drivers in their strategic planning for improvement. As a result, there is a key focus on equity and addressing the poverty-related attainment gap in most schools, reflected in school improvement planning.

Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership at all levels to address excellence and equity for all is a positive feature in most schools. Empowerment to lead improvement and close the poverty-related attainment gap that reflects the needs of schools, communities, children and young people is also a positive aspect in most schools.

Staff confidence and knowledge

In most schools, senior leaders and staff have a good understanding of the socio-economic context of their community. Relevant intelligence from a wide range of partners is often shared with school staff to help them better understand their local context and needs. Staff recognise the importance of knowing the circumstances of individual pupils and overcoming any barriers to their progress in learning.





What is improving?

Increased collaboration across the system

There is growing evidence of increased collaboration across the system; within schools, between schools, within local authorities and wider across the country. As a result, broader approaches are implemented around literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This includes local authority-wide developments such as whole school nurture approaches.

Identifying and addressing barriers to learning

Most schools make active improvements and work well to identify and remove socio-economic barriers for children and young people. Staff are increasingly aware of the potential barriers their learners and their families may face. This knowledge is being used to plan targeted interventions for children and young people and, in a few examples, their families. Contributions from a range of partners, including health professionals, provide targeted support effectively for individuals and groups of learners.

Pupil Equity Funding

Most schools set out a clear rationale for their use of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF). They are making good use of PEF to provide targeted interventions to support children and young people most affected by deprivation. Schools have supplied additional resources, including staffing, to focus on making improvements particularly in children's and young people's learning in literacy, numeracy and supporting their wellbeing. There are positive examples, in a few schools, of PEF being used well to reduce the cost of the school day by providing breakfast clubs and after school activities.



Engagement with the National Benchmarks

Staff across all sectors are developing their use and application of the National Benchmarks, particularly in literacy and numeracy. They are using a range of assessment approaches to make increasingly reliable judgements about children's and young people's progress and Curriculum for Excellence levels of achievement. In the majority of schools, teachers are increasingly involved in moderation activities to support their professional judgements of children's and young people's levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy. In a few schools, moderation activities are well embedded, and staff plan assessment activities across all curricular areas.

Data literacy skills

There is a shared understanding across all sectors of the importance of using data and evidence to support decision making, with a focus on driving improvement. Almost all schools have developed approaches and procedures for tracking and monitoring children's and young people's progress in literacy and numeracy. This has been increasingly supported by local authority tracking systems. In most schools, regular meetings between staff with senior leaders to discuss children's and young people's progress are a key feature of effective practice.

This works well when all staff are involved in collaborative discussions. Staff in almost all schools continue to increase their confidence in the use and analysis of data to plan improvements. The use of Insight in secondary schools allows staff to identify the attainment of different groups of learners, including those residing in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 1 and 2, and young people requiring additional support. This is supporting the planning of interventions to close any gaps between groups and raise their attainment.

Attainment

There is emerging evidence that targeted interventions are leading to improved outcomes for children and young people with barriers to their learning. This includes improved attainment in literacy and numeracy and progress in health and wellbeing. For example, approaches to addressing barriers to learning are supporting children and young people in special schools to re-engage with their education, often following prolonged periods of interrupted learning. Overall, in primary schools children's attainment in literacy and English and numeracy and mathematics, including the attainment of children with additional support needs, is improving. In the senior phase, the size of the gap between the proportion of school leavers from the most and least deprived areas attaining one or more pass varies by SCQF level.

What are the challenges and areas for improvement?



Quality of leadership

The quality of leadership in addressing the poverty-related attainment gap is too variable. There is a need for clearer strategic direction and an increased pace of continuous improvement, particularly for the early years and special sector. Almost all special schools need to have a clearer focus on raising attainment and achievement. This should include articulating and measuring how special schools will reduce the poverty-related attainment gap.

Differentiation

Too often planned learning is not differentiated well enough and does not sufficiently involve learners in planning learning. The focus of whole-class approaches to learning is not implemented effectively to take account of the range of learning needs. Schools need to ensure that planned learning is at the right level of difficulty for individual learners to ensure that they build on prior learning and make the best progress they can.

Moderation

The use of National Benchmarks in curricular areas beyond literacy and numeracy remains an important area for improvement for the majority of schools. As a result, schools are unable to provide levels of attainment or progress of learners across all curricular areas. There is also a need for teachers to engage in moderation activities with colleagues in other schools and sectors to improve their understanding of the moderation cycle and support them to make reliable judgements about national standards.

A lack of understanding of young people's progress in the broad general education is continuing to have a negative impact on attainment. Too many schools are not using

data effectively to track and monitor at a whole school level, with departmental approaches too variable. As a result, some schools cannot put in place appropriate strategies or interventions to address gaps.

Using data to monitor impact

The effective use of data to raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap in children's and young people's learning requires further improvement. This should include using this data more effectively for those facing additional challenges, for example, those living in socio-economic difficulty. A closer focus on monitoring and tracking the progress of cohorts, groups or individuals is required in order to inform interventions and the appropriate provision of learning pathways. In early learning and childcare settings, only a small minority of practitioners effectively use data to inform practice and support children. There is a need for staff to become increasingly involved in the analysis of data. This will enable them to plan interventions and evaluate the impact on raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

What are the imperatives we need to focus on next to make better progress?

- Schools need to be more responsive to how well children and young people progress in their learning by adapting activities and tasks to meet their learning needs and ensure appropriate support and challenge.
- Schools need to ensure that they have reliable data on children's and young people's progress and achievement across all curricular areas to inform planning, raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap.
- Strengthen strategic leadership in early learning and childcare settings and special schools in relation to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
- Further work is required to ensure effective strategies are in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of targeted initiatives.



Illustrations of effective practice

Grange Primary School, Angus Council

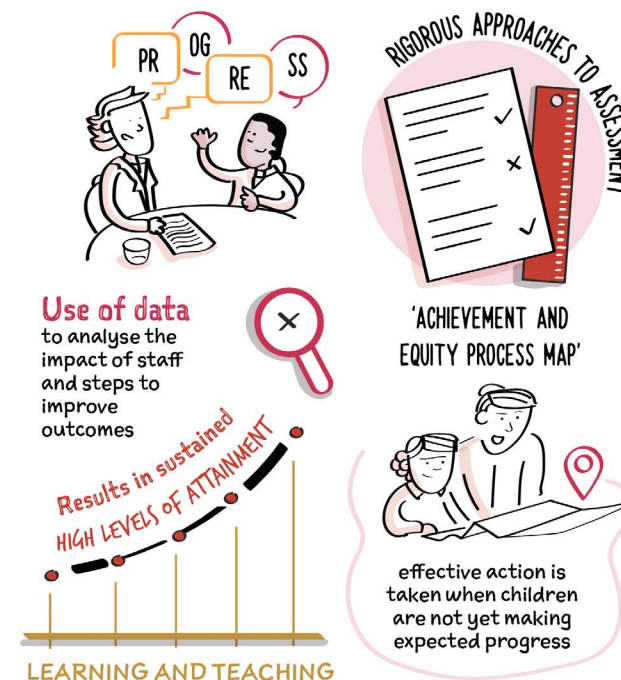
At Grange Primary School, senior leaders and staff have a relentless drive to ensure no child misses out. There is an ethos of nurture and achievement and a commitment to high-quality learning and teaching. Senior leaders' highly effective approaches to monitoring and tracking the progress of all children facing barriers to learning, has improved the school's approach to promoting achievement and equity. The school's innovative 'achievement and equity process map' provides a clear approach for staff to identify children not yet making expected progress, and next steps to take. As a result, senior leaders' allocation of resources and additional support is responsive, focussed and effective. Senior leaders track all children's participation in wider achievements and use this data to ensure that no child misses out. Highly effective partnership working supports the school to meet the needs of individuals and targeted groups. Staff use their very strong relationships with children and families to ensure an inclusive approach. Senior leaders use PEF thoughtfully and effectively to provide targeted support for children, particularly in relation to improving their health and wellbeing. Senior leaders monitor closely the impact of all interventions. This results in almost all targeted children making expected progress in their learning.

Glenrothes High School, Fife Council

The school has a very strong commitment to ensuring equity for all learners. Highly effective support is in place for young people and their families to overcome the impact of economic hardship. Taking into account the contexts of young people's lives beyond school, removing barriers within a framework of 'poverty proofing the school day' are outstanding strengths of the school's approach to promoting equity. The school reduces the 'cost of the school day' through providing support in the areas of uniform, travel, learning, friendship and community, school trips, eating at school, school clubs and home learning. Senior leaders consulted with parents, young people, partners and staff on how best to use PEF. A plan to support the development of young people's literacy, numeracy and wellbeing is now in place having taken account of views. The targeted interventions have a clear rationale and effective arrangements are in place to monitor the impact of this work. There is clear impact for a number of targeted young people on levels of confidence, attendance, engagement and attainment. A few young people articulate the transformational change to them and the impact the interventions have had on their life chances.

Sustained high-levels of ATTAINMENT

Support and challenge to make the best possible



Grange Primary School Sketchnote

ACHIEVING HIGH QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES



RANGE OF SKILLS & ACCREDITED AWARDS



OWNERSHIP

SKILLS FRAMEWORK

Set sail on your skills journey



LEADERSHIP

collaborating | communicating | creating

ACHIEVEMENTS ARE



Recognised



Tracked



Valued



[Castlemilk High School Sketchnote](#)

Castlemilk High School, Glasgow City Council

The school highly effectively supports young people and their families to overcome the impact of poverty. Appreciating the complexities of young people's lives outside school and providing financial support within a framework of poverty proofing the school day are major strengths of the school's approach to promoting equity. Senior leaders and staff are using Pupil Equity Funding to introduce targeted interventions and have a clear rationale for the use of these interventions. There are highly effective arrangements in place to monitor the impact of this work.

Port Glasgow High School, Inverclyde Council

The headteacher has provided clear strategic direction for the school to lead the work of staff and target resources appropriately which promotes equity and inclusion. The school's comprehensive plan for targeting PEF is resulting in clear improvements for young people, such as progress in reading and aspects of numeracy. Young people benefit from safe spaces and opportunities to build self-esteem from improved wellbeing and nurture provision, as part of the PEF improvement plan. The school mitigates well the impact of poverty and inequality to create a more inclusive environment. Young people and parents working with the Child Poverty Action Group have supported the introduction of a social inclusion fund. This is used for popular initiatives such as uniform recycling club, free transport for study classes, prom dress hire and providing free study guides.

St Catherine's Primary School, Renfrewshire Council

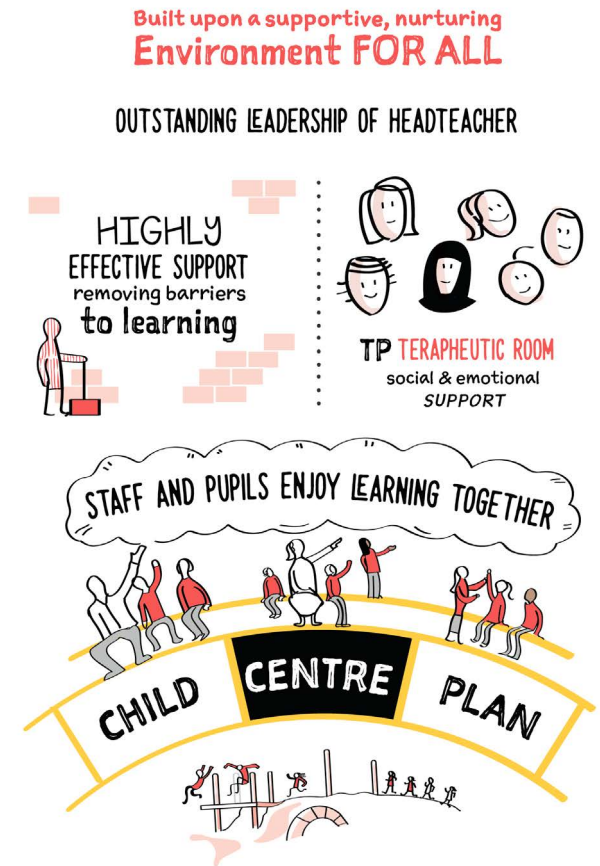
The school has a very clear strategy for achieving excellence and equity for all learners. This is built on a strong research base and knowledge of the local community. Feedback from all stakeholders is used to build on and enhance school priorities. Staff and children created The Reading Café which developed in to a Tech Lit Café following a reflection from parents. This café now offers increased access and use of digital technologies and literacy. Senior leaders have a clear overview of those children who require additional support to overcome barriers to their learning. All staff have a very good knowledge of individual children within the school and have a clear focus on improving equity for all. Children with additional barriers to learning are making appropriate progress in achievements. PEF interventions, which include early intervention, targeted support and transition are leading to improved outcomes for children.

St Francis Xavier's Primary School, Falkirk Council

Staff have a clear understanding of the socio-economic context of the school and actively seek to remove barriers. They are well informed about the gaps in attainment and have a clear raising attainment strategy across the school. In recognition of the cost of the school day, steps are taken to reduce the cost of coming to school and staff work hard to ensure cost does not prevent participation in clubs for all children. Interventions to support all children, including those funded by PEF, are tracked thoroughly to ensure maximum impact on learners. The nurture provision in the therapeutic playroom (TP), supported by PEF, provides a very caring and supportive learning environment for all children. This is a strength of the school. The dedicated staff in the TP room provide high-quality support for children in a nurturing and homely environment. Children who learn in the TP room make significant progress in their personal, social and emotional development. They are also developing their literacy and numeracy skills very well. This is resulting in them being included more fully in the life of the school and making improved progress in their learning.

St Paul's RC High School, Glasgow City Council

In most classes, young people are motivated by a good range of learning experiences in a calm and purposeful environment. Staff are very aware of the socio-economic context of the school and support learners in practical ways. Young people's progress and engagement are also very well supported through the provision of well-attended learning activities outwith the timetable. Senior leaders have developed a popular and comprehensive study programme to support young people in the senior phase funded by PEF. This includes, supported study classes, master classes, Saturday school and Easter school sessions. Evidence shows that these support sessions, and in particular the master class sessions, are having a significant impact on levels of engagement, confidence and enjoyment across a number of subject areas. Staff work relentlessly to maintain the very positive levels of engagement and participation in these extended offers to young people. The whole school approach to developing a nurturing environment where young people are able to develop and grow is exemplary. This is a priority for staff in the school and underpins all that they do. With valuable support from partners, children and young people from both primary and secondary nurture groups worked together in drama, creative writing and storytelling sessions, ultimately producing a storybook of their journey. This led to improved confidence and self-esteem in those who took part. Almost all young people who have been supported in this approach have achieved success later in their school career.



[St Francis Xavier's Primary School Sketchnote](#)

Renfrewshire Council

The effective use of data is a core component in ensuring that Renfrewshire Council close the poverty-related attainment gap. The focus on being a data literate authority allows staff to better understand attainment trends, identify pupils and target support appropriately, and evaluate the impact of interventions. By understanding 'what works' staff continue to improve outcomes and raise attainment for learners across Renfrewshire.

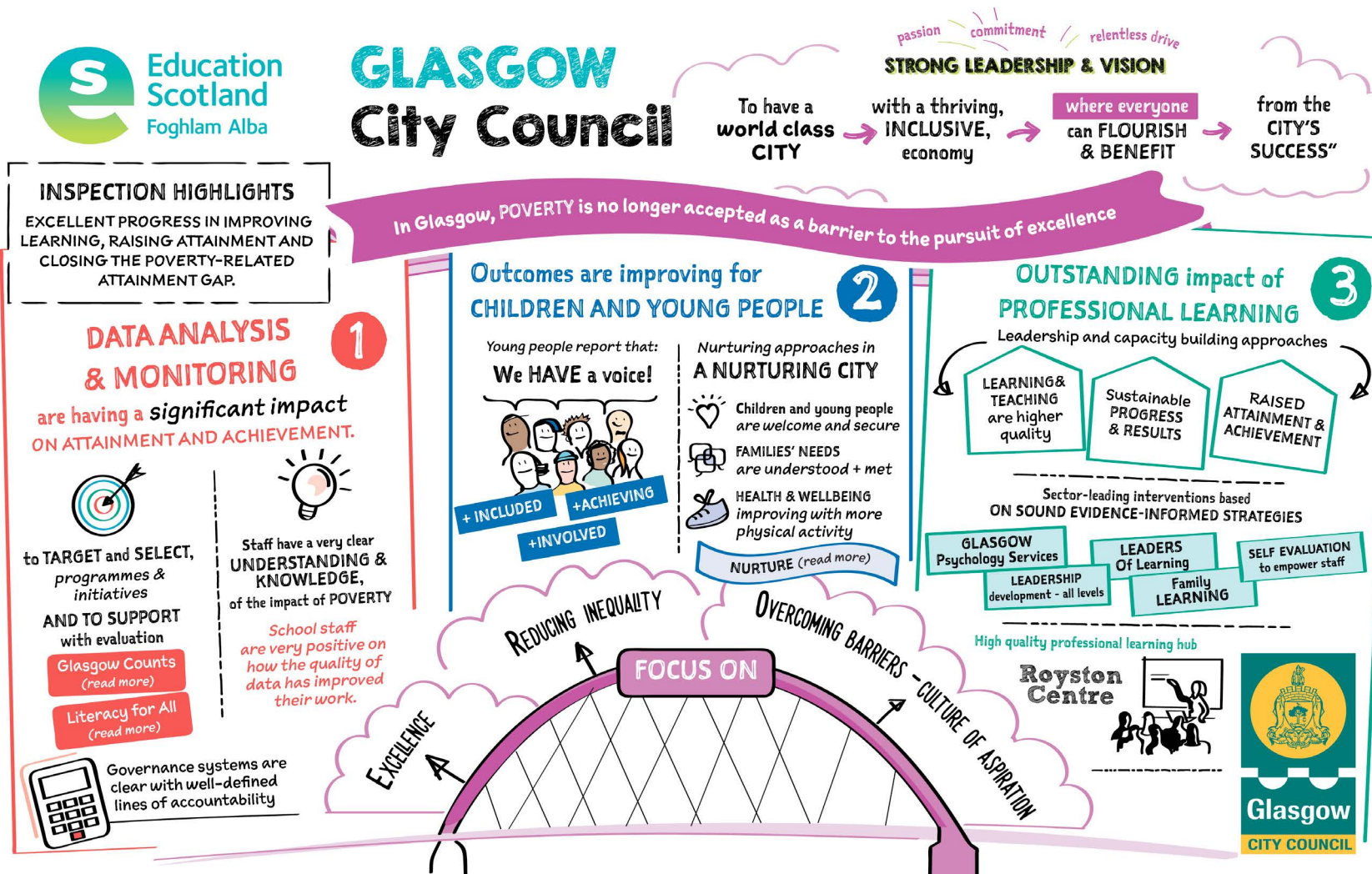
[See hub page for more information](#)



Glasgow City Council

The impact of professional learning is outstanding, and a wide range of sector-leading interventions are impacting positively on families and communities. These outcomes are based on sound evidence-informed strategies which empower staff, along with strong self-evaluation which challenges staff to continue to improve. The approach taken by Glasgow City Council to professional learning places a strong emphasis on building practitioner capacity and creating an empowered system.

[See hub page for more information](#)



Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91% - 99%
Most	75% - 90%
Majority	50% - 74%
Minority/less than half	15% - 49%
A few	Less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.





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