

Inspection of local authorities

How well is East Ayrshire Council improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related gap?

March 2019

Introduction

In 2017 we introduced a new model of inspection of local authorities. As part of this national scrutiny, East Ayrshire Council was inspected during the week commencing 17 September 2018. HM Inspectors and professional associates, working in partnership with Audit Scotland evaluated the education service's strategies to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. These are the aims of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, a key Scottish Government programme introduced in 2015. Within this programme, East Ayrshire Council is one of nine Challenge Authorities.

As part of this inspection, we use the same framework to evaluate the contribution of the educational psychology service to the Scottish Attainment Challenge in East Ayrshire Council. Our findings on this aspect are included throughout this report.

The Attainment Scotland Fund has a total budget of £750 million over the period 2015-16 to 2020-21. As a Challenge Authority, East Ayrshire Council is allocated a significant proportion of this funding. Originally, six schools in East Ayrshire were allocated funding in January 2016 with a further seven schools or services obtaining funding as part of the Challenge Innovation Fund. East Ayrshire Council became a full Challenge Authority in year two of the programme (2016-17). The additional money is being directed to support the excellence and equity agenda. The aim is to close the attainment gap that currently exists between those living in Scotland's least and most deprived areas. This report is our findings on the progress East Ayrshire Council is making and the capacity of the council to continue to make appropriate progress with this work. Whilst we worked in partnership with others to gather the evidence that underpins this, the report and the judgements in it belong solely to Education Scotland.

Throughout the report when you see text that is underlined you can click on this text to get further information from the web pages owned by East Ayrshire Council, Scottish Government or Education Scotland. We hope you will find this useful.

The framework for this inspection includes quality indicators that enable us to evaluate aspects of leadership and management, self-evaluation and improvements in performance. We use our evidence to answer two questions.

1. How effective is the education service's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?
2. How effective is the education service's leadership, governance and management of resources to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap?

As a result, we are able to make an overall judgement about the extent to which East Ayrshire Council is improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Context

The education service in East Ayrshire Council is led by the Head of Education. The service is responsible for the education of over 16,000 school aged children and over 3,000 children between the ages of 0 and 5.

7 council managed early learning and childcare settings

5 partner providers of early learning and childcare settings

41 primary schools

8 secondary schools

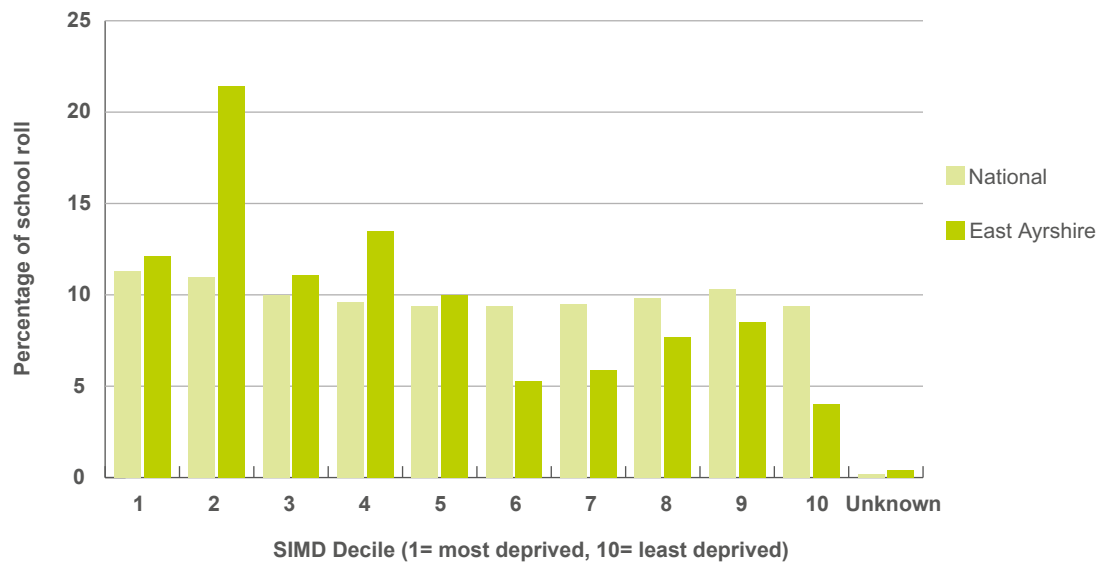
3 schools for children and young people with additional support needs

The Head of Education reports to the Depute Chief Executive. Together with the Chief Executive and elected members, they demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the life chances and outcomes for all children and young people in East Ayrshire.

The Head of Education is supported by the Principal Educational Psychologist and four strategic managers who link with groups of schools and lead on various aspects of the service. In addition, a Scottish Attainment Challenge lead has been appointed and is supported by a further four managers who are taking forward aspects of quality assurance and improvement across the service, for example in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing.

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) provides information about pupils in Scotland's schools. It tells us what percentage of pupils live in the most deprived and least deprived areas of each council. From the graph below it can be seen that in 2016 just over a third (33.5%) of all pupils in East Ayrshire Council live in the areas of highest deprivation categorised as SIMD 1 and 2. This is above the national average.

Percentage of pupils on East Ayrshire Council’s roll in September 2016 living within the SIMD deciles 1 (most deprived) to 10 (least deprived), all sectors



The current [Children and Young People’s Service Plan 2017-2020](#) is aligned to the National Improvement Framework (NIF), the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding. There is evidence of clear linkages between key strategic planning documents starting with the [East Ayrshire Community Plan 2015-2030](#), which is viewed by the council and its partners as the sovereign document for East Ayrshire. It is focused on mitigating, preventing and undoing inequalities in East Ayrshire. Links then run through each of the three delivery plans of the council’s Community Plan through to the most recent version of the [Education Service Improvement Plan 2018-2021](#). The links with school improvement plans (SIPs), are less clear to stakeholders. In part, this is because too few are accessible online. Moving forward, completed plans should be publicly available on all school websites for parents and stakeholders to view.

The Attainment Scotland Fund in East Ayrshire Council

Primary and secondary schools

East Ayrshire became a Challenge Authority in 2016-17, one year after the seven authorities who were identified in the first tranche. Prior to this, six primary schools were identified as Challenge Schools in January 2016. A further seven establishments and services successfully bid for funding under the Scottish Attainment Challenge innovation fund.

“ We have a passion for making a difference and overcoming hurdles. ”

headteacher

The planning and management of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in year one was challenging, due in large part to difficulties with the recruitment of staff into the identified posts. As a result, the authority spent significantly less than anticipated. The authority was awarded just over £2 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary programme for 2016-17, however, actual expenditure was approximately £1.1 million. Significant problems were encountered recruiting staff including home link workers for Education Groups as well as speech and language therapists. As a result, some of the planned literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing programmes did not proceed as planned in year one.

In 2017-18, the authority was awarded £2.76 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary programme and the authority spent £2.56 million. This much smaller underspend was due mainly to staff variations, including the situation where individuals were appointed to a different point on the pay scale, later start dates than anticipated and the timing of procurement exercises. The majority of the expenditure was for staffing costs with other expenditure supporting professional learning and partnership working.

In 2018-19, the authority was awarded £3.76 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary programme which it anticipates will be spent in the current financial year.

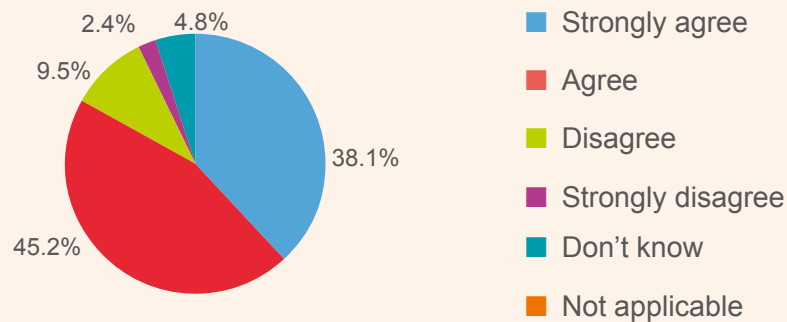
Scottish Attainment Challenge funding in East Ayrshire is allocated under several workstreams:

- literacy and numeracy;
- health and wellbeing;
- parental involvement; and
- leadership.

Central finance officers monitor Scottish Attainment Challenge expenditure well and liaise effectively with relevant officers, particularly those in human resources (HR) and procurement. Funding is also allocated for the overall management of the programme. Externally, there are clear monitoring and reporting arrangements with the Scottish Government with regard to Scottish Attainment Challenge funding, which involve reporting progress on a quarterly/mid-year and annual basis.

The following shows responses from 42 headteachers.

The education authority has robust systems for managing finance to improve outcomes for learners.



Since joining the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2016, East Ayrshire Council's approach to delivering interventions has been too broad and not sufficiently well targeted. In our school visits and focus group meetings, school staff were more confident in discussing interventions that would be considered as a pre-requisite for good learning and teaching, for example coherent programmes of study for literacy. They were less confident in talking about approaches that were aimed at reducing the poverty-related attainment gap. Too few were able to show a clear understanding of the poverty-related attainment gap in their establishment's context. Schools should be supported to be better able to describe their particular attainment gap with reference to their local context. Work should continue from the centre on helping staff to understand, articulate and appropriately apply both universal and targeted interventions. The authority now needs to use evidence-based approaches to build on standalone projects that are showing the greatest impact. It should increase the pace of change and ensure a wider reach across more establishments. The authority recognises it now needs to extend the reach of best practice. This will encourage a sustained and faster development of appropriate skill sets with staff through appropriate career-long professional learning (CLPL). This CLPL should include the development of high-quality learning and teaching.

“ The professional learning has had a great impact on my department – we are having conversations that we’ve never had before – we are feeling energised! ”

secondary mathematics teacher

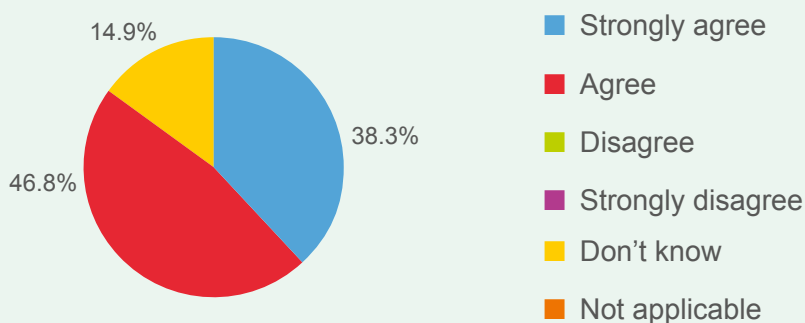
How effective is the education service's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?

East Ayrshire Council has begun to put in place approaches that are supporting better tracking of children's and young people's progress. These are encouraging closer examination of the poverty-related attainment gap for individuals and groups of children and young people. There is still a considerable job to be done in supporting teachers to become more confident in data literacy. Using a range of methodology, including existing strengths in improvement science, there is a need to develop further staff skills in evaluating the impact of initiatives.

The authority is developing more sophisticated approaches to analysing data, including the [Data Compendium](#) which is a compilation, from a range of sources, of key statistics for children and young people in the East Ayrshire area. This was produced for the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnership and has been used more widely, including by headteachers when targeting funding towards specific interventions. Education officers have been analysing and refining the data which is being used to measure the impact of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. With support from the Attainment Scotland Fund, a data officer and research assistant have been employed to promote data literacy and provide professional learning to individual schools. The data analyst and other officers have been investigating trends from historical data. Authority officers also focus on data analysis when carrying out the recently revised approach to school reviews. The new education intranet system provides attendance and school context data for all schools and a tracking system for primary and special schools. This is beginning to provide more accurate and meaningful pupil progress data to schools. Headteachers appreciate having greater access to appropriate data including attendance and the breakdown of SIMD deciles in their catchment area. There is, however, still considerable work to be done in supporting class teachers to be more confident in the use of data. It is important that interventions are clearly baselined at the outset, and measures and outcomes clearly defined. Central officers need to continue to work with schools to ensure that interventions are firmly focused on impact and outcomes rather than input and processes.

The following shows responses from centrally-deployed staff (47 staff).

The education authority uses data effectively to demonstrate our progress in raising attainment.



Headteachers find improvement methodology helpful when considering interventions and how best to measure their impact. There is a strong culture of action research in East Ayrshire Council and these small tests of change, where successful in schools, could now be scaled up in order to ensure greater progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The council should ensure that this approach is balanced with the need to ensure its approaches are having as large a reach across as many children and young people as possible.

“ There’s been a step change in pace and challenge, we tackle things head on now.”

headteacher

Council officers, school staff and partner agencies are clear that the authority’s approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding articulates well with the [Getting it right for every child \(GIRFEC\)](#) agenda. They feel that the extra resources available through the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding are helping to support this national policy driver and facilitate the increasing of capacity in schools across the authority. Inspectors agree that this is beginning to build capacity within schools. Examples of how the authority has utilised Attainment Scotland Funding include the development of training in restorative approaches and in classroom assistant coaches. Stakeholders believe that partnership working is improving.

The authority continues to build upon and further strengthen the impact of partnership working to enhance staff capacity in improving literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. [Vibrant Communities](#) is an important partner for many schools, working to improve the life chances of children, young people and their families. Other partners, including Centrestage, are making a positive difference to a few targeted young people and their families. Where successful, these are building young people’s confidence, improving their sense of belonging and re-engaging them in their learning. Through partnership working with Barnardos, iLunch successfully supported up to 48 families daily during summer 2018.

The authority has used Attainment Scotland Funding to develop a range of leadership courses, unified by a new leadership framework. This is at a relatively early stage of development, with some aspects launching during September 2018. The following [link](#) shows an example of distributed leadership within a primary school. It is hoped that the suite of professional learning opportunities will address the identified need for increased leadership capacity and facilitate greater progress in raising attainment and in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Staff report that they have found coaching training particularly helpful. Leadership programmes designed to support headteachers, middle leaders and class teachers, provide a positive start and a scaffold to develop the capacity of leaders at all levels. Through Attainment Scotland Funding, a central leadership officer has been appointed to take this work forward. It is important that the remit of this officer has a sharp focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Senior leaders should consider providing more bespoke training which will impact directly on the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding agenda. The authority is mindful of the needs of, and impact from, classroom assistants. It recognises their strengths and has developed a suite of training programmes for them and is using their skills in a number of learning situations.

The ‘early level pedagogy’ approach currently involves four primary schools across the authority. Due to the early stage of this project, it is not yet possible to report on impact. Significantly more primary schools are involved in literacy and numeracy developments. School staff described

improvements and the progress children were making as a result of a number of initiatives. There now needs to be a continued focus on developing pedagogy across the authority at all stages, including secondary schools.

In terms of developing sustainable practices at all levels, the authority should continue to build on approaches already started, to ensure that new methodologies, practices and programmes are as widely cascaded as possible in order to maximise the reach of interventions. Whilst much positive work has been done to take forward new initiatives in the authority over the past year, its impact is not yet evident. The authority should ensure that it has clear intended outcomes linked to each initiative, plus baseline data, so that it can evidence impact over time for each approach.

One very positive example of working with partners to support an identified need was the Columba 1400 joint P7 parent/pupil initiative within a primary school. Several of the children in P7 and their parents signed up for this programme. This involved some in-school coaching sessions followed by a residential experience. Many parents involved report a profound, positive change in their relationship with their children as a result of participating in this programme. In addition, children in P7 have taken their new skills into S1 and there are plans to help build on these leadership skills by working with other young people who have not been part of the experience. The authority now needs to continue to gather together best practice around developing children's and young people's leadership skills, share this more widely and form a coherent strategy to ensure that all children and young people benefit from leadership opportunities.

A valuable initiative has been the Constant and Never-ending Improvement programme running within Bellsbank Primary School. It provides a positive and powerful example of resource from the Attainment Scotland Fund leading to real and sustainable change within a parent body, their children and outwards into the community. This programme involves parents experiencing coaching and mentoring through the involvement of a private provider programme. As a result, parents report increased confidence, more effective parenting skills, and more ambition for both themselves and their children. By following this [link](#) find out more about another example of working in partnership with parents from Loudoun Academy.

Six schools in East Ayrshire Council were identified as Challenge Schools in October 2015 and a further four schools and two centres were successful in bidding for innovation funding in January 2016. In these schools, from 2014-15 to 2017-18, there have been increases in performance in numeracy and literacy in some measures. Compared to the overall authority average, attainment challenge schools have improved performance at a faster rate in half of the measures. There has been a narrowing of the gap between the authority average and the schools in the attainment challenge in three out of four P1, two out of four P4 and one out of four P7 measures. In terms of the schools supported by challenge funding for a longer period, attainment in numeracy is showing stronger improvement than literacy.

Across all schools, the authority is making some progress in improving learning and raising attainment in literacy and numeracy. At the broad general education, teacher judgement indicates that pupils' performance in some areas has improved over the last three years. Authority data indicates that numeracy has improved for children at P1, P7 and S3, with a reduction at P4. Improvements have been noted in P1, P7 and S3 writing. There have been increases in P7 and S3 reading and in listening and talking. At other stages, attainment in these areas has declined.

How effective is the education service's leadership, governance and management of resources to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap?

The authority has established a governance structure for both the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding that has been subject to several changes since it was first approved in June 2016. The Scottish Attainment Challenge Programme Board, established from the start, has oversight of the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme and quality assures progress within Scottish Attainment Challenge workstreams. The Programme Board meets quarterly, and is coordinated by the Scottish Attainment Challenge Lead. Its membership includes workstream leads and representatives from finance, HR, Vibrant Communities, and East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership.

An Equity and Attainment Board was established in August 2017 to scrutinise and review all interventions, implementation, progress and outcomes in respect of Scottish Attainment Challenge. This Board also has oversight of the coordination of related funding sources available to the authority, including Pupil Equity Funding. The Equity and Attainment Board meets around four times a year and agenda items include Scottish Attainment Challenge progress reports, detailed finance reports, and Pupil Equity Funding progress reports from headteachers. The composition of this board allows for wider input (both internal and external) to the scrutiny of the use of Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding funds in East Ayrshire.

At the time of the inspection, a Scottish Attainment Challenge Review Group was due to meet for the first time in October 2018. The Review Group is scheduled to meet twice a year and its key role will be to provide scrutiny regarding progress at an operational level of the Attainment Challenge.

Reports with appropriate and timely statistics from the Equity and Attainment Board go to the council's Cabinet meetings for the information of elected members. These reports helpfully contain a high level of detail related to planned and actual expenditure. There is a regular update within the council's processes to manage and mitigate financial risks linked to Scottish Attainment Challenge.

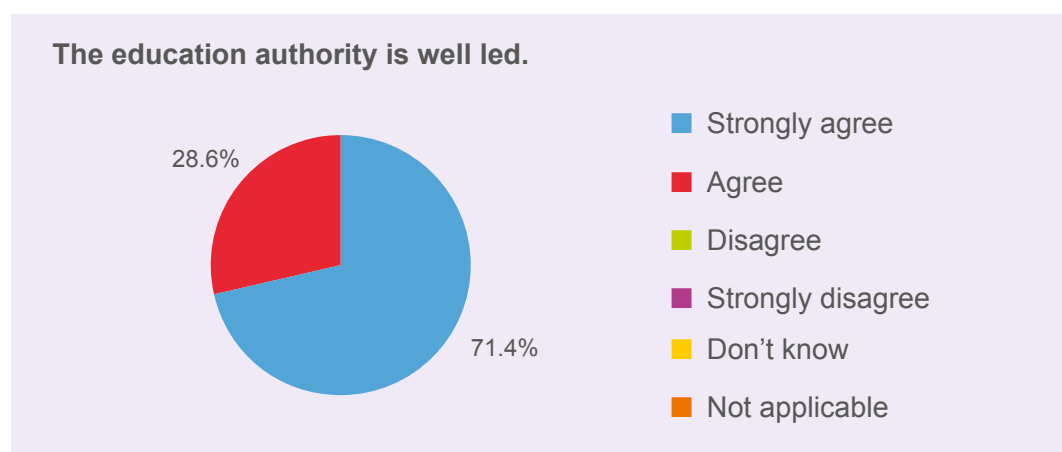
Elected members have the opportunity to engage with issues related to the Scottish Attainment Challenge through these Cabinet meetings. Both the Cabinet and the council's Governance and Scrutiny Committee receive appropriate and timely information on the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding. The Governance and Scrutiny Committee meets monthly. It holds the Cabinet to account, scrutinising decisions both prior to and after they are made, reviewing policy, monitoring performance and external scrutiny. It also reviews service areas and programmes such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Headteachers may be invited to give presentations to the committee on Pupil Equity Funding and receive feedback.

Overall, the respective remits of the various groups involved as described above, and the links between them, need to be set out more clearly and communicated to stakeholders across the authority.

There is a clear vision and commitment to raising attainment within the council. However, during the first two years of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, approaches were not fully integrated into the work of the education service in East Ayrshire Council. This has recently improved and senior officers are now communicating their vision and key priorities more effectively, to education staff, partner agencies and other stakeholders. For example, schools are now required to ensure and demonstrate that their SIPs include priorities relating to the use of Pupil Equity Fund, and have been finalised after consulting with parents, pupils and wider stakeholders.

Leadership of the education service has recently improved. Since the appointment of the new Head of Education in early 2018, there has been a positive shift in culture, processes and expectations that is providing welcome structure and challenge to schools. The Head of Education has been auditing the work of the service and considering how best to take forward the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding agendas in East Ayrshire Council. She is committed to improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The approach to school reviews has been modified so that these are now more challenging and include regular consideration of attainment data. As these become embedded more fully, a more consistent focus on using the data to explore the poverty-related attainment gap is required. In moving forward, the authority should continue to consider the balance between autonomy, empowerment, support and challenge.

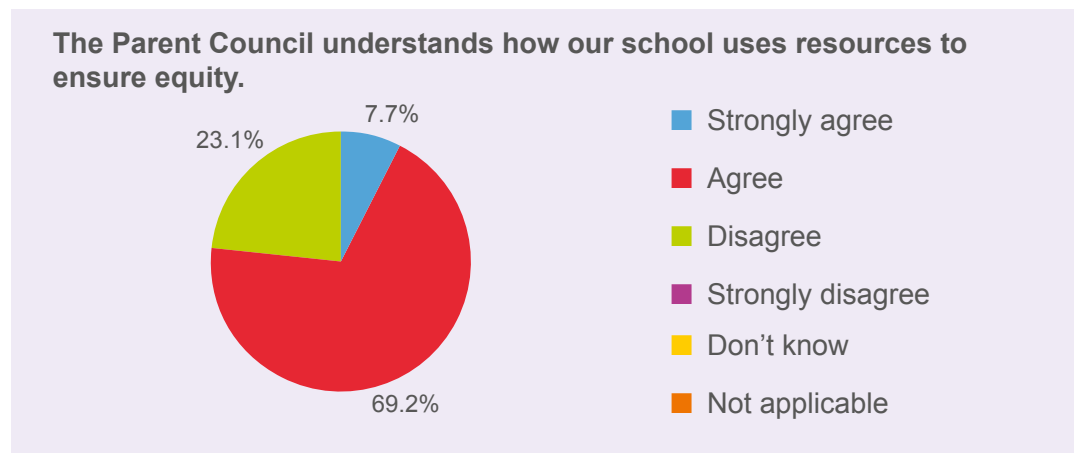
The following shows responses from 42 headteachers.



In terms of the leadership of innovative programmes stemming from the use of Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding monies, the authority has embraced a variety of approaches including those linked to literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. The authority should now continue to narrow down the range of programmes, to be more coherent and use data better to inform them about which interventions are having the greatest impact. Executive headteachers have been appointed to lead Education Groups along with the appropriate Strategic Education Group Manager, HR staff and finance officers. Headteachers appreciate opportunities for one-to-one meetings with finance officers who get to know their schools and circumstances well and give monthly feedback on their Pupil Equity Funding spend. HR officers are working with schools that are employing additional staff through Pupil Equity Funding allocations. Headteachers appreciate the national and local Pupil Equity Funding guidance and feel that the revised approach, where Pupil Equity Funding is integrated into the SIP, has assisted in reducing bureaucracy. They found recent conferences and headteachers' meetings valuable. Clear and helpful guidance was provided by the authority to headteachers in March 2017 to support their decision making with regards to Pupil Equity Funding. The authority should now consider reviewing and updating this guidance in advance of 2019-20 to provide more detailed information relating to procurement.

A few parents told Inspectors that they would welcome more information from schools about how additional funding is being spent.

The following shows responses from 13 parent council chairs.



The authority has considered the issues of sustainability of Scottish Attainment Challenge initiatives once funding ceases. It has identified a range of options to ensure the sustainability of initiatives beyond the funding period. Approaches, include the upskilling of teachers, training and empowering local communities to take the lead in running interventions and developing in-house capacity. This will train trainers for initiatives such as numeracy, literacy and restorative approaches. Trainers include teachers and also classroom assistants. In most cases, the initiatives are in their early stages. In the short to medium term, it will be important for officers to take time to review the range of initiatives and to consider what a streamlined universal offer and targeted offer from the authority will look like. In moving forward, it should also set out more formal plans to inform stakeholders.

“ Our school is a real inclusion zone! ”

primary parent

Overall, leavers’ destination performance is strong. Similar to the national trend, leavers’ destinations have improved since 2012-13 and are now above 94%. Follow this [link](#) to find out more about the support for young people through activity agreements. The authority is aware of the need to tackle the considerable variation between schools. Over the last five years, the attainment of S4 young people in terms of literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 3, 4 and 5 has been a strength. In a number of measures and years, this has been above the virtual comparator. In 2016-17, almost all school leavers (95%) achieved both literacy and numeracy at level 3 or above; almost all (91%) achieved both literacy and numeracy at level 4 or above and the majority (68%) achieved literacy and numeracy awards at level 5 or above. The authority is continuing its work to raise the attainment of young people in SIMD 1 and to increase the number and quality of awards for care-experienced young people.

The authority is aware of the need to improve school attendance and reduce exclusions in primary and secondary schools. It has taken steps to improve attendance through putting in place a range of approaches, including recruiting home link workers and setting up inclusion hubs. The level of exclusions was significantly reduced in the last year. However, there is more work to be done to address the level of variability in both the levels of attendance and exclusions that exists between secondary schools.

The contribution of the East Ayrshire educational psychology service to the Scottish Attainment Challenge

East Ayrshire educational psychological service is making a positive contribution in helping to close the poverty-related attainment gap in East Ayrshire, with particular regard to the implementation of the Relationships Framework and the development of the inclusion hubs. The service's improvement plan is focused on closing the poverty-related attainment gap and achieving equity and excellence for all. Identified areas for improvement have clear, measurable targets that add value to those of the education service and children's and young people's plans. The value added by the educational psychology service in relation to the analysis and use of data is helping to improve practice across the education service, leading to some improvements in performance. A more refined analysis of the poverty-related attainment gap will strengthen the contribution of the educational psychology service further. The service has continued to build on its strengths in the analysis and evaluation of a wider range of qualitative and quantitative data since its [validated self-evaluation published in August 2017](#). Educational psychologists demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to focus on outcomes from their interventions and general practice. Their analysis of data is skilful and they are aware of the need to triangulate evidence to validate their evaluations of impact and to ensure their self-evaluation of practice is robust. The service should continue to build on its practice to measure improvements resulting from targeted versus universal interventions. Moving forward, the service should consider how it can facilitate the measurement of the effects of health and wellbeing interventions on improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy attainment.

To what extent is the education service improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap?

East Ayrshire Council is making satisfactory progress with improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. HM Inspector's evidence and evaluation to date indicates the following strengths and aspects for development.

Strengths

- The commitment of senior leaders to understand the needs of local communities.
- The recently refreshed leadership, which is providing greater clarity in the education service.
- Partnership working, which is helping to develop successful family and community work.

Aspects for development

- Increase the pace of progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap and improve approaches to using data to support this.
- Approaches to sustainability should be more formally documented and shared with elected members to provide them with assurance that the most effective interventions provided through the Scottish Attainment Challenge are embedded within schools.
- Improve rates of attendance and continue to reduce exclusions, while also addressing the variations in these between schools.

What happens next?

The evidence and evaluation to date indicates that East Ayrshire Council is making satisfactory progress in improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Their self-evaluation processes are beginning to lead to aspects of improvement. As a result, Education Scotland will make no further evaluative visits in connection with this inspection.

HM Inspectors
Education Scotland
March 2019

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