

Inspection of Local Authorities

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

July 2018

Introduction

In 2017, we introduced a new model of inspection of local authorities which we piloted in December 2017. [North Ayrshire Council](#) was inspected during week commencing 19 February 2018. HM Inspectors and professional associates, working in partnership with Audit Scotland, evaluated the education authority 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, North Ayrshire Council is one of the seven original Challenge Authorities, which was extended to nine in 2016.

According to recent figures from [End Child Poverty](#), North Ayrshire currently has the second highest proportion of children in poverty in Scotland, at 28.3%, with only Glasgow having higher levels.

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 North Ayrshire Council. Our findings on this aspect are included throughout this report.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge has a total budget of £750 million over the period 2015-16 to 2020-21. As a Challenge Authority, North Ayrshire Council is allocated a significant proportion of this funding. The money is being directed to support the excellence and equity agenda. The aim is to close the attainment gap which currently exists between those living in Scotland's least and most deprived areas. This report is our findings on the progress North 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 the report 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 North Ayrshire Council, the Scottish Government or Education Scotland. We hope you will find this useful.

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

1. How effective is the education authority's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?
2. How effective is the education authority'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 North Ayrshire Council is improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Context

The education authority in North Ayrshire Council is responsible for the education of 18,266 pupils across the authority's primary, secondary and additional support needs schools and a further 2,348 children in early learning and childcare settings. The strategic lead for education across the council is the Executive Director of Education and Youth Employment. Education is delivered through:

6 council-managed early learning and childcare settings;

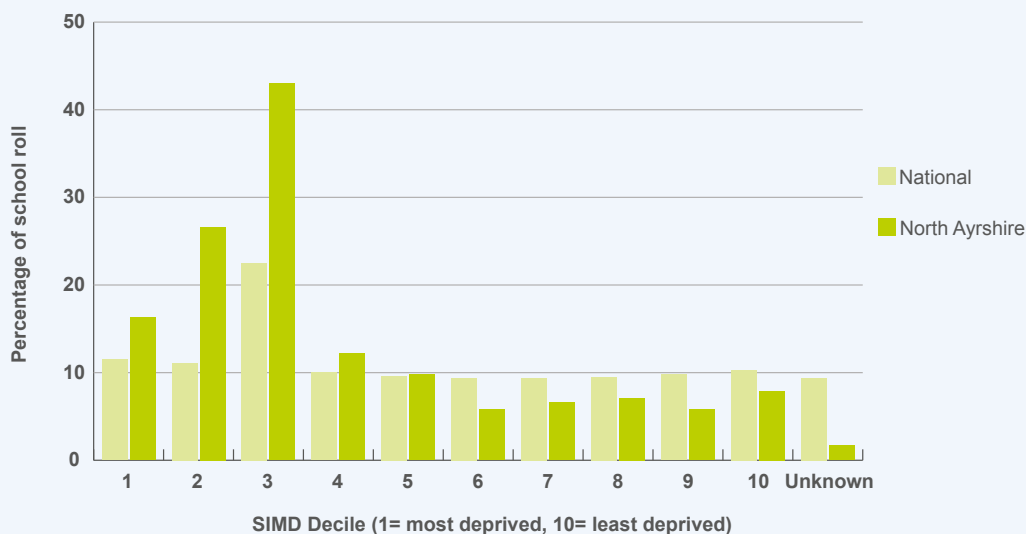
19 centres where early learning and childcare is provided in partnership;

49 primary schools;

9 secondary schools; and

4 schools for children and young people with additional support needs.

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



- More than 50% of North Ayrshire Council pupils live in SIMD deciles 1 to 3.
- More than 25% of North Ayrshire Council pupils live in SIMD decile 2.
- The percentage of pupils from North Ayrshire Council living in SIMD deciles 1 to 3 is significantly above the national average.
- The percentage of pupils from North Ayrshire Council living in SIMD deciles 5 to 10 is significantly below the national average.

The Attainment Scotland Fund in North Ayrshire Council

North Ayrshire is now in its third year as a Challenge Authority. Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, the authority has been allocated £8.63 million from the Scottish Government to support Scottish Attainment Challenge primary initiatives and £2.07 million to support Scottish Attainment Challenge secondary initiatives. [Pupil Equity Funding](#) began in 2017-18. The total funding being provided directed to headteachers in North Ayrshire is £3.4 million.

Five thematic workstreams were initially established by the authority after they were selected as a challenge authority to support the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap. These were as follows.

- Establishing the [Professional Learning Academy](#) (PLA), focusing on improving teaching and learning in literacy and numeracy.
- Creating nurturing schools.
- Developing and maintaining good mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- Supporting enhanced family learning.
- Enhancing assessment and better use of data to target improvement.

The five key priorities and the associated high-level actions of the directorate plan support the council's strategic objective of 'ensuring people have the right skills for learning, life and work'. The three-year strategic plan is in its final year of the cycle.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge funding is managed centrally by the head of service overseen by the Executive Director. The senior manager leading each workstream has an operational overview for funding for those areas of responsibility. These senior leads have access to professional financial assistance from the corporate finance team. Schools do not manage any of the Scottish Attainment Challenge expenditure. The performance manager receives monthly reports on the expenditure on each workstream who then informs each of the workstream leads of their current position. Currently there are plans to enhance the arrangements by arranging for the workstream leads to receive financial reports direct from the general ledger.

Primary schools

Scottish Attainment Challenge primary schools' funding began in the 2015-16 financial year. Between 2015-16 and 2017-18, the authority has drawn down a total of £6.63 million from the Scottish Government to support Scottish Attainment Challenge primary initiatives. The authority projected it would spend £8.63 million in the period from 2015-16 to 2017-18. This reflects the fact that the full year grant was not announced until the end of June 2015. In addition this timing, near the end of the school summer term, meant that there were also delays, with initiatives not getting underway until late August. Delays were further compounded by recruitment difficulties. Recruitment issues have continued to be a challenge, although this was most challenging in year 1.

Secondary schools

Scottish Attainment Challenge secondary schools' funding began in 2016-17. Between 2016-17 and 2017-18, the authority has drawn down £708,000. The authority projected it would spend £2.07 million in the period from 2016-17 to 2017-18. Similar recruitment issues as identified above have been the primary reason of the differences between planned and actual expenditure.

Pupil Equity Funding began in 2017-18. The total funding being provided directly to headteachers in North Ayrshire is £3.4 million.

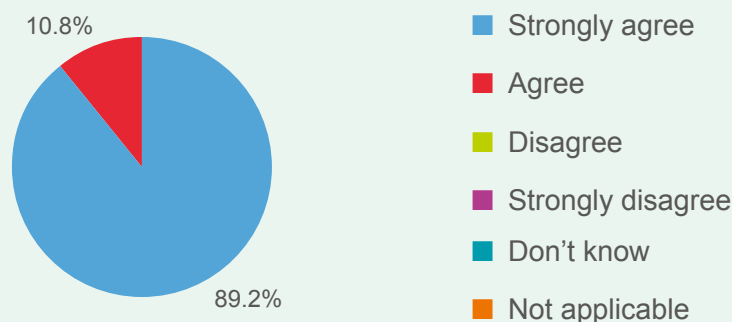
How effective is the education authority's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?

The authority has a very clear vision supported by well defined values, including five key priorities for education which align closely with the National Improvement Framework. The vision and priorities for education are part of a clear 'golden thread' running through the authority in relation to raising attainment. The work of teachers, schools and authority officers clearly articulate with these. There is an overt focus within the authority on the effects of poverty on the education of children and young people. All centrally-based staff who responded to the pre inspection questionnaire agreed that there is a shared commitment to improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap amongst staff in the education authority.

The authority has a very wide range of data available to evaluate its work and is interrogating this in increasingly sophisticated and rigorous ways. It is presenting attainment and contextual data to schools in ever more accessible ways so that staff can analyse it themselves as appropriate and plan for improvement. Data is regularly presented to and shared with elected members in cabinet papers and briefings so that they have the opportunity to understand and scrutinise progress. Similarly, Director's briefings are regularly shared with education staff to keep them up to date with progress related to both Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding.

Self-evaluation permeates every aspect of education at authority, school and individual practitioner level. There is a clear, shared expectation that everyone involved will evaluate their practice and continuously improve it. This involves regularly gathering and analysing the views of learners, parents and other stakeholders who are involved in education. The authority's extremely effective approach to self evaluation informs policy and practice and is focused on ensuring that learning activities are appropriate.

There is a shared commitment to improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap amongst staff in the education authority.



The authority has developed and regularly revised its quality improvement framework. This is a sector-leading self evaluation tool for educational establishments which includes a structured approach to regular evaluative school visits by members of the central officer team. It has already been the focus of discussion with other local authorities in the Regional Improvement Collaborative. The central team also evaluates its own work by using an adapted version of [Quality Management in Education 2](#) (QMIE2).

“ Improvement is supported and driven by the central team but is not delivered by it. ”

senior manager

Headteachers value the authority’s highly effective self-evaluation approaches in the quality improvement framework and use these to improve practice in their establishments. With particular reference to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, this includes a focus on the quality and impact of the nurture provision on children and young people and their families. Schools involve these stakeholders and others in their self-evaluation. The planned authority visits validate the schools’ self-evaluation of their progress and impact. This collaborative approach is extremely valuable for practitioners and headteachers as they plan for further improvement. With particular reference to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, this includes a focus on the quality and impact of the nurture provision on children and young people and their families. All headteachers who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that the education authority has encouraged them to develop a systematic approach to self-evaluation through the use of the quality improvement framework. Similarly, the work of the Family Learning Team (FLT) and the PLA is evaluated by stakeholders and this is then used for self-evaluation of the service.

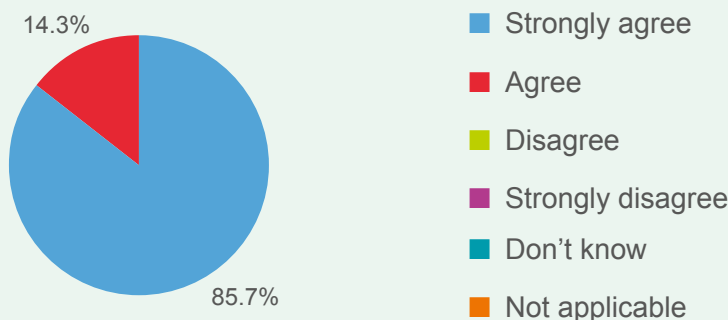
“ The Attainment Challenge has added a forensic level to our self-evaluation. ”

head of service

The authority uses research findings to identify potential interventions and approaches to learning and teaching which will improve outcomes for children and young people. Self-evaluation processes help schools and the authority to identify and evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of interventions they have implemented and to continuously adapt, improve and change their approaches to planning and securing improvement and to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The authority is clearly able to demonstrate a range of improvements which have been achieved as part of its work through the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the Pupil Equity Fund.

Children and young people appreciate that particular approaches, such as nurture, are meeting their needs, making them more confident learners and giving them opportunities to discuss their needs in a safe environment.

The education authority promotes partnership working with other services and organisations with a focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap..



Elected members appreciate regular reports of progress. All elected members who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that they have a good understanding of the council's education strategies and improvement plans, especially in relation to attainment and wider achievement.

All partners who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that the education authority promotes partnership working with other services and organisations with a focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The authority should continue to increase partners' involvement in self-evaluation.

There is a very clear focus in the authority on using evidence to improve learning and teaching and to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. This is encapsulated in the workstreams related to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which were identified as the areas that could have the greatest impact on addressing these areas. The authority has already identified, and the inspection team agree, that it should further develop its strategies to increase partners' involvement in self-evaluation. In their use of the Pupil Equity Fund allocations, schools have continued to focus on and develop in these agreed areas.

“ When we analyse data it is professional judgement, not professional opinion. ”

senior manager

The authority has been running a very effective data literacy initiative for the past year. Data coaches are trained to support data analysis within their school with a specific focus on raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This has further increased the skill levels and confidence of staff to analyse and evaluate data for improvement at individual, group and whole school levels. The North Ayrshire Council approach to the collection and analysis of data is improving year upon year and data is used well to inform interventions at both local authority and school level. The data literacy workstream has brought a coherence to this aspect of the authority's work. Schools are making increasingly effective use of social media to keep parents well informed about the work of the school and how they are improving outcomes for learners. School staff realise the need to encourage children and young people, and their parents, to have higher expectations of what they can achieve.

Schools are involved in moderation activities within their clusters which ensures that their attainment data is increasingly robust and reliable. These judgements of data gathered about children and young people's progress are supported with standardised assessments. Senior and middle managers in schools also regularly observe learning and teaching to ensure that the needs of pupils are being met through the most appropriate approaches. The central team validates this through their cycle of quality improvement visits, informing the development and work of initiatives such as the PLA and the authority's approach to nurture.

The authority has won a number of recent educational awards, including the General Teaching Council of Scotland [Excellence in Professional Learning Award 2017](#) for the work of the PLA to raise attainment, particularly for those from the most deprived backgrounds, and the Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative [Quality Improvement Award 2017 for Quality Improvement in Early Years](#). Staff from other authorities visit regularly to observe and share practice.

“ Education and youth employment has no poverty of aspiration, opportunity or expectation for their children and families. ”

Executive Director

The authority is clearly able to demonstrate a range of significant improvements which have been achieved as part of its work through Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding. Continuous, ongoing self-evaluation has provided an accurate understanding of progress in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, for example, through a range of tracking and monitoring approaches including the primary school progress tracker. The authority also uses qualitative approaches to evaluate progress and improvements, including regular questionnaires and stakeholder focus groups. This self-evaluation work helps to identify areas for development and is used to plan appropriate interventions and approaches at an authority level to help to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

[North Ayrshire Council educational psychology service](#) has rigorously assessed the impact and outcomes of nurture and restorative practices. Qualitative and quantitative data measuring wellbeing, resilience and social and emotional development demonstrate significant improvements both before and after interventions. Many of these outcomes are strongest in the primary sector because of the early stage of development in rolling out the programmes at other stages. Fewer children are now attending enhanced nurture bases than before the introduction of nurture groups. Referrals to external day provisions have also reduced since work on nurture was started, indicating that more capacity and confidence exists in schools to support children and young people. The roll out and scaling up of nurture approaches in the primary sector due to Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding has been very well evaluated. This allows the educational psychology service to target resources at those schools and individual children who require more support. Sustainability is supported by continuous professional development, coaching and mentoring of individual teachers and rigorous tracking and monitoring of need. The Scottish Attainment Challenge plans for nurture ensured that identified funding was effectively targeted to implementing the approach.

Schools have a very clear understanding of their context, needs and performance through effective self-evaluation. They have used this to identify and implement appropriate interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap using their Pupil Equity Fund allocation.

“ It’s not simply about the Pupil Equity Fund or Scottish Attainment Challenge money - it’s about the joined up practice. ”

primary headteacher

**READ
WRITE
COUNT**

A key strand for the Scottish Attainment Challenge workstream has ensured a focus on family learning. Strategic aims and objectives have had a clear and developing impact on driving the work of the FLT to secure increasingly more positive outcomes for both families and communities across the authority. The FLT has played an important role in better

engaging parents in education in close partnership with schools. Their interventions are agreed and planned with the schools and are sensitive to the needs of parents.

Ninety-two per cent of schools in quartiles 1 and 2 are engaging in family learning programmes, activities and interventions. A key focus for the FLT has been encouraging parents and families in supporting children's learning in literacy and numeracy through, for example, promoting and delivering the [Read, Write, Count](#) programme at P2 and P3.

The FLT is helping an increasing number of parents to engage further in their own and their child's learning through volunteering in school, accreditation and opening up routes into further training, education and employment and for some parents this is for the first time. It is achieving this in partnership with other agencies, including Ayrshire College, Skills Development Scotland and the Department of Work and Pensions. Across the authority there have been examples of success in increasing the ambition of parents, in developing parenting skills and improving the employability of parents. There is evidence of increased attendance of children when their parents are more engaged in work of school. This in turn has led to increased motivation of parents to get involved in school issues and greater motivation of children and young people to learn. Parents and children have been engaged in joint learning activities, for example, in the [Wee Famille](#) initiative learning French, delivered in partnership with [Scotland's National Centre for Languages \(SCILT\)](#). Some schools have worked with parents to help them to better understand how the school works and to have more productive relationships with teachers.

An additional focus of the FLT has been to support families in transitions into and after primary school and this work has reached 23 primary and four secondary schools. Engagement of families in secondary schools has been strengthened through partnership with the [Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland](#) (CELCIS) in delivering 'parents in partnership' and in the establishing of family learning zones. There is significant evidence that the work of the FLT is helping to counter parental isolation and lack of confidence by providing a context for parents to come together for discussion around common experiences and challenges of parenting. However, more than one third of the chairs of Parent Councils who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire disagreed that the education authority is good at letting the Parent Council know about new initiatives to improve education. The authority acknowledges that there is further work to be done to engage families and support parents in evaluating aspects of improvement activity at both school and authority level and in extending the reach of this work across the whole council area.

Staff are aware that plans for Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund need to include a sustainability element, and staff are planning to ensure that initiatives or approaches can continue if funding ceases in the future.

“ It's not just a quick fix. It's about up-skilling all the staff. That's where the sustainability comes in. ”

primary headteacher

In early years, there has been a steady increase over time in the proportion of children meeting their developmental milestones at the point at which they start school from 2014 to 2017 rising from 69% in 2014 to 77% in 2017. This has been supported by a successful quality improvement project on communication friendly environments in partnership with NHS Ayrshire and Arran. Early learning and childcare practitioners and parents and carers are reporting the positive impact that the project has had on them and their children.

Raising attainment in numeracy remains broadly in line with the national average at primary stages but below the national average in S3. Teacher professional judgement data shows that there is an improving trend overall in numeracy attainment levels with the greatest gains being the proportion of pupils achieving first level at P4, with notable gains for the percentage attaining second level by P7. This also shows that there is evidence of a reduction in the poverty-related attainment gap when comparing the attainment of children and young people from SIMD deciles 1 and 2 and deciles 9 and 10 in every measure. When comparing the progress of pupils in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 compared to those in SIMD deciles 3 to 10, the authority is narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap at almost all of the main stages. However, the authority is aware that the gap has widened slightly for those achieving first level at P4.

Attainment in literacy has increased at each of the main stages from P1 through to S3, from 2015 to 2017, for reading, writing and listening and talking. In reading, the attainment gap between those children and young people in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 and those in deciles 9 and 10 has reduced at all of the main stages, except P4. In writing, the attainment gap between those children and young people in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 and those in deciles 9 and 10 has reduced at all of the main stages. The authority is aware of the need to continue to monitor attainment in writing, particularly boy's attainment and particularly writing attainment at P1. The authority is also appropriately focused on narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap, particularly at P4 stages. In listening and talking, the attainment gap between those children and young people in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 and those in deciles 9 and 10 has reduced at all of the main stages, except P1. From a total of 12 main measures across literacy, the authority has narrowed the gap in 10 of those from 2016 to 2017.

Attainment in numeracy remains broadly in line with the national average at primary stages but slightly below at S3. Teacher judgements show that there is an improving trend in overall numeracy attainment levels, with the greatest gains being the number of children achieving first level at P4. In numeracy, teacher judgements show that there is evidence of a narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap when comparing SIMD deciles 1 and 2 with deciles 9 and 10 in every measure. When comparing the progress of children and young people in SIMD deciles 1 and 2, compared to those in SIMD deciles 3 to 10, the authority is closing the gaps at almost every level, but is aware that the gap has widened slightly for those achieving first level at P4. Children in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 have maintained progress over the course of two years in P1 and have improved at all other levels with the largest increase being seen for those who are secure in second level for numeracy.

In 2017, the percentage of young people achieving fourth level by the end of S3 compared well to the national average across both literacy and numeracy. The authority has divided its schools into four quartiles according to levels of deprivation. Quartile 4 data at P1 highlights anomalies across both literacy and numeracy attainment measures and the authority should explore further the underlying reasons behind the unusual pattern of attainment here. Given the large number of small schools in this quartile, moderation of assessment standards may require further support. The authority recognises that there is scope to extend the positive work taking place at cluster level to build the confidence of staff in the validity and reliability of the data sets being gathered at class, school and authority level.

Measures put in place to gauge progress in health and wellbeing at an authority level, include the early years developmental milestones and also [Pupil Attitudes to Self and School](#) (PASS), although this is at a very early stage of development. Targeted measures are put in place to measure the effectiveness of specific

interventions such as nurture projects. A baseline has been established using PASS with P4 to P7 pupils and the initial results show a positive overall picture, with all measures showing between 80% and 90% for high or moderate satisfaction levels. Individual schools have begun the process of analysing the PASS responses to inform future curricular changes for health and wellbeing, as well as future planning of additional targeted interventions. The authority should continue to develop its approaches to measuring improvement and evaluating progress in health and wellbeing.

Attendance rates overall in both primary and secondary sectors broadly mirror the national picture. Although there has been a slight decline in attendance rates over the last three years in both primary and secondary, where the gap between the most and least deprived has widened, this is mirrored by the national trend, and the gap for North Ayrshire Council remains lower than the national gap.

Overall, exclusions remain below the national average with the exclusion of pupils in SIMD deciles 1 and 2 well below the national average. Exclusions have decreased over the past three years in secondary schools but have increased slightly in primary schools. The gaps between exclusions for pupils living in SIMD deciles 1 and 2, compared to those living in other deciles, has risen slightly but remains well below the national average. Over the last three years, the gap in number of exclusions between children and young people coming from the most and least deprived backgrounds has decreased in secondary schools. The authority should continue to monitor the slight increase of the gap in primary schools.

Girls continue to attain better than boys in numeracy and in all aspects of literacy, similar to the national pattern. Based on the 2016 and 2017 data, the gap between girls and boys attainment, in terms of the percentage attaining expected national levels, increases from early to third level. It is particularly notable in writing at first, second and third levels, and in reading at third level. The authority is aware of the need to continue to monitor attainment in writing, particularly boys attainment and particularly writing attainment at P1. The authority is also appropriately focused on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, particularly at the P4 stage.

The authority approach to the collection and analysis of data is improving year upon year and data is used well to inform interventions at both local authority and school level. The data literacy workstream has brought a coherence to this aspect of the authority's work. This is well informed by the data literacy framework and supported through associated staff training and the work of data coaches in all establishments. Analysis of the attainment gaps has taken place at both authority and school levels and there is a shared understanding of the poverty-related gaps. Headteachers and staff welcome, and are making increasing use of, the data packs provided by the local authority and the support and challenge offered by central officers and data coaches to support the use of data to inform improvement.

A key aspect of the authority approach to planning for further improvement and raising attainment has been the setting up of the PLA. This sector leading approach has helped staff across the authority access a wide range of high quality professional learning activities which are helping to raise attainment, particularly for those from the most deprived backgrounds. These include presentations by high quality external presenters, such as Galina Dolya from [Key to Learning](#). The work of the PLA has reached staff in every school in North Ayrshire Council. Staff are very positive about the training and its impact on the work of schools, improving both pedagogy and outcomes for children and young people. Improving approaches to quality learning and teaching are at the core of this work. Clear evidence exists of how the work of the PLA is supporting staff in taking forward meaningful interventions for teaching and learning which are having a measurable impact on

children's progress. The nature of the intervention and the associated measures of success are negotiated between the schools and the PLA through a Service Level Agreement. This ensures that the PLA is building capacity amongst staff. Interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap are identified and informed by data gathered at whole authority level, for example, interventions for writing in the middle stages.

“ I have been teaching for a long time and the Professional Learning Academy has provided the best professional development of my career. ”

class teacher

The educational psychology service is valued for its contribution to evidence based practice and works well in partnership with the PLA. Overall, the focus on mental health and wellbeing through a wide range of interventions and supported by educational psychology service and other partners, is improving outcomes in attendance, exclusions, aggressive incidents and reports of wellbeing.

There is a strong culture of collaborative professional learning across the authority with a high engagement and focus on improvement. Those spoken to felt that their professional learning is valued and the authority is strongly committed to improving teacher professionalism and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Staff participating in the middle leadership programme are particularly positive and appreciative of the steps that the authority has taken to invest in their skills and professionalism. Other opportunities, including the Headteacher Leadership Academy, Coaching and Mentoring and Hands on Headship, are together providing an impressive suite of supports for leadership development, which is having an increasing reach and impact across the authority. The authority's Scottish Attainment Challenge plan has encouraged and enabled staff to take on additional responsibilities for improving outcomes for learners. Opportunities for secondments have further built the capacity of individual staff to take on leadership responsibilities. The authority has continued to provide ongoing professional learning opportunities for both newly appointed and existing headteachers. Headteacher involvement in both Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund associated activity has reinvigorated many in carrying out their role with a renewed and sustained focus on planning appropriate interventions to secure improved outcomes for children and young people, tracking the progress of all children and young people more closely and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

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

There is a clearly articulated vision and well-defined set of priorities for raising attainment within North Ayrshire based on the principles of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. This helps to drive improvement and is underpinned by strong leadership from the Executive Director and senior team. The Chief Executive of the council empowers the senior team to strive for improvement, providing appropriate support and challenge.

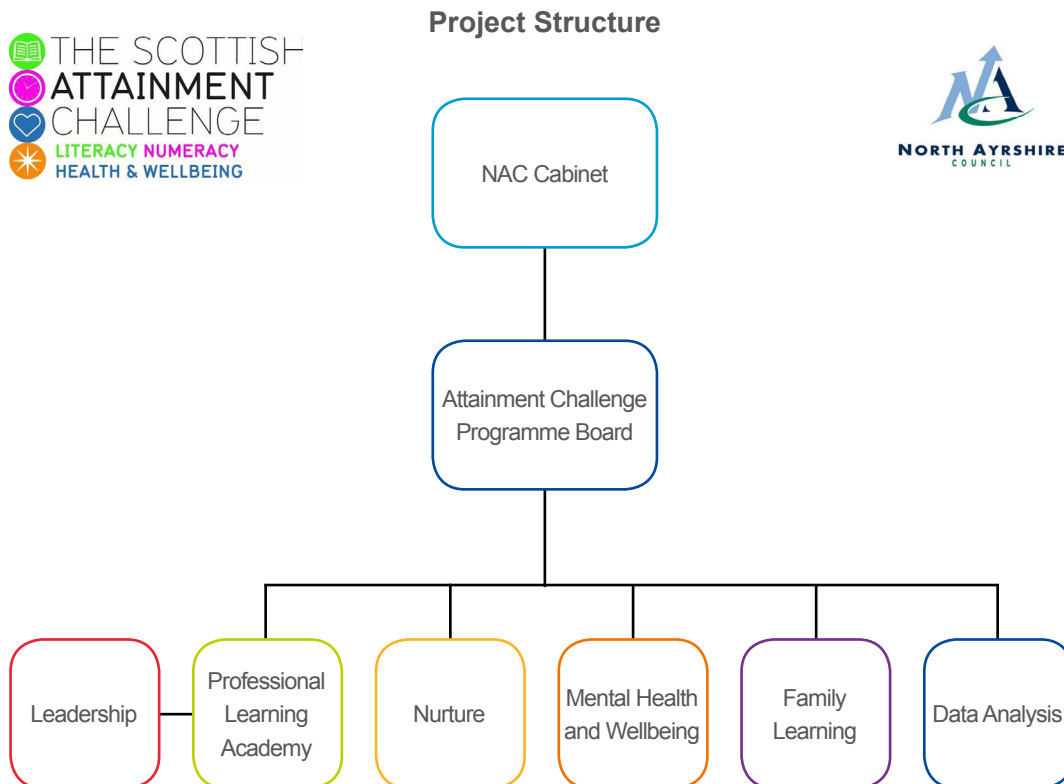
Strategic planning is very well focused on improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. The strong use of data enables the staff to identify and prioritise very well important areas for improvement. Pupil Equity Fund plans are appropriately being incorporated into school improvement plans to minimise bureaucracy and ensure a coherent approach to improving outcomes for children and young people. The planning process would benefit from a continuing increased involvement from stakeholders and partners, particularly parents and learners. It would also benefit from ensuring that Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund monies allocated to initiatives are spent timeously.

The central senior team is a vital element in improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The blend of skills and capacity, coupled with the very clear remits of senior managers, enables them to provide very effective support and challenge to school leaders but also empowers headteachers to take appropriate risks and lead targeted interventions based on research and supported by strong accountability. The strength of the senior team enables all staff to lead learning and focus very well on improving outcomes for children and young people.

Overall, strategic leadership across the education authority is very effective and there is a strong link between this and the improving outcomes for children and young people living in the highest levels of deprivation. Continuing to engage with stakeholders, particularly parents and learners will help communities to become more involved in supporting learning and raising attainment across North Ayrshire Council.

There is a robust and well-articulated governance framework for education. Lines of accountability are clear and governance arrangements are well understood at all levels. The Attainment Challenge Programme Board meets monthly and individual workstream priorities are monitored rigorously. The focus is very much on outcomes and impact, facilitated very well by the use of flash reports and skilled chairmanship. Workstream leads have appropriate responsibilities and clear lines of accountability. They lead and monitor their workstreams using a diverse range of approaches,

including a range of both qualitative and quantitative data sets. There is an opportunity for the Attainment Challenge Programme Board to extend its reach and get direct input from headteachers and other stakeholders. Continuing to widen the membership of governance groups at all levels will generate a richer source of information and feedback to build on the already strong practice and provide increased data on what may not be working from the perspective of learners, parents, staff and partners.



The existing cluster arrangements are supporting effective governance, monitoring and sharing of Pupil Equity Fund initiative progress. Cluster meetings are used well to share practice and to provide support and challenge around appropriate use of finance. They also provide good opportunities for senior leaders to monitor Pupil Equity Fund spend and outcomes. However, elected members in the cabinet would benefit from more detailed cost information on both Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding, including planned and actual expenditure and planned and actual progress with initiatives.

The senior team works alongside headteachers very well and uses the quality improvement framework to hold headteachers accountable for educational outcomes and financial spending. This close partnership working is effective in helping to support strong governance in these areas. There are opportunities for headteachers to make greater use of participatory budgeting in relation to decisions associated with Pupil Equity Funding. Pupil Equity Fund plans should actively set out the risks associated with the selected interventions and how any such risks can be mitigated. Completed plans should be available on all school websites for parents and stakeholders to view.

Robust monitoring arrangements have been put in place for Scottish Attainment Challenge funding, which ensure that the authority has regular oversight of how and where the funding for Scottish Attainment Challenge is being spent. Senior managers who lead on each workstream manage Scottish Attainment Challenge

funding working alongside the performance manager and finance manager. Externally, there are clear monitoring and reporting arrangements with the Scottish Government with regards to Scottish Attainment Challenge funding, reporting progress on a quarterly/mid-year and annual basis. Planning and management of Scottish Attainment Challenge, particularly in year 1 but also in later years, has been challenging, largely due to difficulties with the recruitment of staff into identified posts. The authority therefore spent significantly less than it already anticipated.

Good financial arrangements have been put in place for Pupil Equity Fund expenditure, which is separated from core school budgets. This ensures all Pupil Equity Fund expenditure at a school level is not subsumed within the overall school budget and can be easily tracked and monitored, allowing reports to be available from the ledger at any times. There is a structured approach, overall, to Pupil Equity Fund planning at a school level. In 2017-18, all schools have developed Pupil Equity Fund plans that set out the rationale for specific approaches to spending, proposed interventions, impact measures and governance arrangements. There is a good level of support and guidance provided for schools by the central education team, particularly around procurement, recruitment, monitoring and governance. There is a clear, shared understanding amongst headteachers regarding what Pupil Equity Funding aims to achieve and a recognition that ownership and accountability for the funding lies with them.

There is a strong focus on best value in terms of procurement of goods and services relating to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. A recent example of this was the tendering process for the Leadership and Coaching Programme. There is good evidence of compliance with both procurement policies and procedures, supported by widespread training, development of appropriate staff and a recent positive internal audit report on procurement. Senior leaders have used Scottish Attainment Challenge funding creatively, supported by innovative ways to source other finance, to improve learning, raise attainment and close the poverty-related gap, including the PLA and the FLT. These examples also demonstrate the use of high quality resources and a desire to improve capacity for sustainability.

Formal exit strategies should now be developed in recognition that the funding is time limited. There is a need for headteachers to continue to think more creatively about how Pupil Equity Funding will be used in future years given the challenges of recruiting to certain posts. There is also a need to improve the efficiency of Pupil Equity Fund spending. In 2017-18, it is estimated that more than £2.5 million will be carried into 2018-19. This is mainly due to issues with staff recruitment. Longer term, there is a potential risk with the Pupil Equity Fund that when monies cannot be spent in a particular financial year it may not be allowed to be carried forward. The authority should ensure that a review is undertaken of the experience of the first year of Pupil Equity Funding to identify any lessons learned and areas for improvement in the management arrangements. The review should also include seeking feedback from headteachers.

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



Education Scotland is confident that the evidence and evaluation to date indicates that the educational psychology service is making a strong contribution to helping to close the poverty-related attainment gap in North Ayrshire Council. This is particularly evident in relation to the implementation of nurture and restorative practices which is very good.

Further development in the use of data to demonstrate long term outcomes, and an increased focus on SIMD 1 and 2 populations will strengthen the contribution of the educational psychology service further. The close synergy between the educational psychology service and the educational priorities of the local authority has led to a clear role for the educational psychology service in relation to Scottish Attainment Challenge developments. The inclusion of the principal educational psychologist in the senior management team with responsibility for specific workstreams has effectively helped to embed the work of the educational psychology service. Service delivery is enhanced further by the leadership of the depute principal educational psychologist and educational psychology team. Education Scotland has confidence that the service has the capacity to continue to improve.

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

North Ayrshire Council is making **very good** progress with improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. HM Inspectors are confident that the evidence and evaluation to date indicates the following strengths and aspects for development.

Strengths

- The central officer team's drive, vision and capacity for continuous improvement, supported by strong governance structures, provide opportunities for innovation within an appropriate framework of accountability at all levels.
- There are shared values and common purpose where school staff feel valued and very well supported.
- The very strong leadership of the Executive Director and leadership team is driving improved outcomes for children and young people.
- Partnership working within the Scottish Attainment Challenge thematic workstreams is leading to improved outcomes for children, young people and their families living in the highest areas of deprivation.
- Very effective self-evaluation is leading to improved learning, raised attainment and a narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap.
- Very strong approaches to staff development are evident across the whole authority led by the work undertaken by the PLA. The development of leadership at all levels is building leadership capacity across the authority.

Aspects for development

- The authority should continue to build on identified areas of strong and sector leading practice.
- The authority should continue to engage a wider range of stakeholders, including parents and pupils, in self evaluation, planning and governance of the Scottish Attainment Challenge across North Ayrshire Council.
- The authority should further strengthen the information provided to the cabinet to further enhance scrutiny and transparency.
- The authority should confirm formal exit strategies for Scottish Attainment Challenge workstreams as a matter of priority and share them with elected members to ensure sustainability.

What happens next?

Education Scotland is confident that the evidence and evaluation to date indicates that North Ayrshire Council is making very good progress in improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We are confident that the local authority's self-evaluation processes are robust and leading to improvements. As result we will make no further evaluative visits in connection with this inspection.

HM Inspectors
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