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Convener  
Education, Children and Young People Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

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Dear Convenor

I attach the Scottish Government and Education Scotland's joint response to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's inquiry report on the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

I would like to take this opportunity to emphasise both my personal commitment and this Government's commitment to delivering on the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge: to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a particular focus on tackling the poverty related attainment gap.

The 2016/17 Programme for Government made clear our commitment to closing the poverty related attainment gap and to "substantially eliminate" it over the course of the decade since then. This has not changed – that's why this commitment is reaffirmed in the 2022/23 Programme for Government published earlier this month. Whilst this remains a complex and long-term endeavour, I am fully committed to that ambition and to making more progress, faster.

As the report highlights, teachers, headteachers and a range of other staff in schools, local authorities and community and third sector organisations are doing excellent work to support children and young people impacted by poverty every day. The Scottish Attainment Challenge and its associated investment and resources, such as Education Scotland's Attainment Advisors, are supporting that work.

I trust you will find that our response to the Committee's recommendations reflects the key importance I attach to progressing this very important work. For clarity, I will take this opportunity to set out some areas of work that are in part outwith the scope of Education Scotland.

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While the statutory responsibility for local education policy, provision of school education for every school-age child, improving outcomes and reducing inequalities in educational outcomes sits with Councils, the Joint Agreement by Education Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) that was published in 2018 sets out that ‘improving the education and life chances of our children and young people is the defining mission of our Scottish education system.’ The Joint Agreement helpfully recognises that within an empowered education system, which includes schools, teachers, pupils and parents, no one part of the system can make progress without collaboration and partnership with the others. Within this context, I will set out briefly the role of Education Scotland in relation to a few of the Committee’s recommendations:

- Recommendation 9: Education Scotland places significant priority on provision of resources to support improvement work by local authorities in this area, and ensure that it is central to professional dialogue and evaluation of progress and impact. This includes through the work of improvement teams and during the professional dialogue between HM Inspectors and schools during inspections.
- Recommendation 10: I am pleased that we are taking a collaborative approach with local government to considering variation as a result of the publication of the Audit Scotland report in March 2021. The strength of this joint approach is bringing added value to the local work that is gaining traction through Education Scotland’s Collaborative Improvement work with ADES, and the development of a strategy for universal, targeted and intensive support. I expect existing local reporting mechanisms, which will take account of progress on delivery of local stretch aims delivery, to provide a strong evidence base against which to assess progress in future.
- Recommendation 12: HM Inspectors do not currently have responsibility for evaluating Regional Improvement Collaboratives, which are not legal entities. I have asked the Chief Inspector to scope whether a thematic review of the impact of RICs can be carried out in session 2023/24.
- Recommendation 13: Local authority spending is of course audited by Audit Scotland. I have asked Education Scotland to ensure effective use of all strands of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, including in relation to partnership working with the third sector in local systems, features strongly in their work with local authorities and schools.
- Recommendation 23: Skills Development Scotland (SDS) monitor long-term destinations; Education Scotland works with SDS to promote deeper understanding of the issues and engage in dialogue with local authorities about improving performance in this measure, which is also included in the requirements for the new local stretch aims.

As I indicated during my evidence, the great challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and now the current cost of living crisis strengthen the moral imperative of this work. I am confident that with the changes made to the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme, including the development of local stretch aims, and with an increased investment from £750 million to £1 billion over the course of this parliamentary term, we can expect to see significant progress across all local areas in closing the poverty related attainment gap during this parliamentary session.

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I very much welcome the Committee's focus on the important work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and trust that the detail in my attached response will reassure Members that their findings are receiving due attention; and I look forward to further updating the Committee in due course.

Yours sincerely

**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**

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# EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE SCOTTISH ATTAINMENT CHALLENGE INQUIRY: SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT AND EDUCATION SCOTLAND RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- We welcome the recognition the Committee has given to the commitment and dedication of teachers as they work to support children and young people impacted by poverty. The evidence in the report is striking and chimes with what we see and hear when out visiting schools and we would like to thank headteachers, teachers and the wider workforce for their recognition of and commitment to the moral imperative of tackling the poverty related attainment gap.

## SCOTTISH ATTAINMENT CHALLENGE

### **The attainment gap**

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The Scottish Government has acknowledged the findings of the 2021 Audit Scotland report and is progressing a series of actions to increase the pace of progress in closing the poverty related attainment gap. It is widely acknowledged that the impact of COVID-19, and the period of school building closures, is likely to have had a significant impact on the attainment gap.
- Scottish Government and Education Scotland jointly undertook an Equity Audit during the autumn of 2020 to deepen our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 and school building closures on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to outline the actions already taken to meet this challenge and to set clear areas of focus for accelerating recovery. The findings of this audit reiterate the importance of an ongoing, long-term and system-wide focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, which helped inform the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge Programme that was announced in November 2021.

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- Before the pandemic, the year-on-year trend in Curriculum for Excellence levels (ACEL) data was positive.
  - In the two-year period between 2016/17 and 2018/19 the proportion of primary school pupils achieving expected levels in literacy had increased 3.1 percentage points, and by 2.7 percentage points for numeracy.
  - In this period, the gaps between the proportion of primary pupils from the most and least deprived areas who achieved their expected level in literacy and in numeracy had both reduced.
- We know though that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted learners from more disadvantaged backgrounds, both here in Scotland and around the world. We are determined to accelerate the progress that has been made. That’s why we are investing a record £1 billion in the Scottish Attainment Challenge over the course of this parliament to tackle the poverty related attainment gap and support education recovery. Alongside this, the introduction of the Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress which includes locally identified stretch aims for progress is already driving a renewed focus on narrowing the poverty related attainment gap. Education Scotland is currently working with local authorities to ensure their stretch aims are ambitious, take account of local contexts and provide increased clarity on expectations to substantially eliminate the poverty related attainment gap by 2026. Alongside the work to set stretch aims, we are seeing local authorities review and refresh their approach to implementing the Scottish Attainment Challenge. This came through strongly at a recent Education Scotland/ADES joint seminar during which LA colleagues shared some of their approaches to date. Education Scotland will publish a Recovery and Accelerating Progress report by the end of September 2022 which will provide an overview of progress during 2021/22 and next steps. Our collaborative work to refresh the Scottish Attainment Challenge has from the outset been based on the need for a whole system response involving strong partnership working between Scottish Government, local authorities, Education Scotland, ADES, COSLA and other key stakeholders, as we work collectively to achieve the 2016/17 Programme for Government commitment to “substantially eliminate” the poverty-related attainment gap by 2026.

## Focus on equity

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- We welcome the recognition from the Committee that the attainment challenge has heightened knowledge and awareness of the barriers faced by children and young people living in poverty. It is clear from the evidence, and recognised by Professor Mel Ainscow at the Committee, that the programme has brought about a systemic change in terms of culture, ethos and leadership; a strengthened awareness of the barriers facing children and young people adversely affected by socio-economic disadvantage;

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and a recognition of the significant role of local authorities in driving forward a strategic vision for equity at local level. Headteachers are clearly focused on improving outcomes for learners and accelerating progress for those who are under-performing, monitoring more closely their own school 'gaps'. We recognise that we must now accelerate the pace of progress, with schools and education services working with partners across all services and the third sector to support children and young people impacted by poverty. Learning and teaching approaches in all classrooms must ensure accelerated progress for those who have farthest to travel.

## Impact of the pandemic

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The pre-pandemic figures for the current key measures in the National Improvement Framework provide us with one helpful baseline from which we measure progress. The need to establish a pre-pandemic baseline will form part of the consideration of which additional measures might be included in future iterations of the NIF. To inform that work, this summer we held a formal consultation looking at these measures and which additional measures it would be appropriate to include going forward, in order to ensure that the basket of key measures can both track trends over time and include data on wider outcomes as well as attainment.
- The impact of the pandemic must, of course, be considered as we continue our work to tackle the poverty related attainment gap, and the data used to measure progress must account for that.
- Rather than impose top-down targets, we have through our Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress required local authorities to set their own stretch aims for progress against an agreed set of measures. This enables local authorities to use local data and knowledge aligned to their own specific contexts and experiences of the pandemic to set their own ambitious but realistic aims for progress. It is these aims, which the Government will receive on 30 September this year, that will inform the national picture on the collective ambition and expected pace of progress in closing the gap over the next year, which we will publish later this year.

## New funding approach

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

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- We welcome the Committee’s recognition of the key steps that have been taken to refresh the Scottish Attainment Challenge to accelerate progress in tackling the poverty related attainment gap and support education recovery. This includes the introduction of Strategic Equity Funding, providing all local authorities with a funded role to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap for the first time, recognising that poverty impacts children and young people across all of Scotland.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- We recognise the impact that the introduction of Strategic Equity Funding may have on local authorities, in particular Challenge Authorities. However, multi-year allocations confirmed over a four-year period will allow all local authorities to plan for the long term. The redistribution of funding is also taking place over four years, supporting Challenge Authorities to transition to their equitable share over time.
- Scotland’s Council leaders agreed and welcomed this refreshed model. The rationale for this important change, as explained at Committee, is that Children in Low Income Families data (used for the new funding model) shows that, in 2019-20, 59% of children living in relative poverty before housing costs lived outside those nine Challenge Authorities. Our new distribution model recognises that poverty exists in every local authority in Scotland.
- Cllr Stephen McCabe, COSLA’s then spokesperson for Children & Young People welcomed the move: ‘...we welcome the recognition that councils across Scotland will be pivotal in work to tackle the attainment gap – not only providing additional support within schools but enabling stronger links with the wide range of important services for children, young people and their families that sit beyond the school gates.’
- We will, of course, monitor the impact of this approach to distribution, in particular for the Challenge Authorities and schools that were in the Schools’ Programme, via annual reporting and engagement events with local authorities. Education Scotland’s Attainment Advisors have a key role in providing support to these local authorities. They are continuously working with local authority SAC lead officers to ensure appropriate planning for effective use of SEF over the tapering period.

## **FREEDOM WITHIN A FRAMEWORK**

Recommendation 7. The Committee notes the role played by headteachers in the deployment of PEF in schools. Headteachers’ capacity is the key factor in the performance of the attainment challenge. The Committee notes concerns about current challenges with recruitment and retention of headteachers. Given the critical role headteachers play in delivery

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and accountability for PEF spending, the Committee asks the Scottish Government to set out what steps it is taking to address recruitment and retention issues.

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- Since the start of the pandemic our priority has been to ensure additional teachers are in the system to aid education recovery. We continue to empower Headteachers. We will continue to progress our commitment to recruiting at least 3,500 additional teachers and 500 classroom assistants, and will also work with our SNCT partners to reducing class contact by 1.5 hrs per week, to achieve the associated benefits for teachers and children and young people. Our Budget committed further permanent funding of £145.5 million to support education staffing from 2022-23, representing the biggest increase to support teacher recruitment since 2007.
- We have been working with education stakeholders to explore issues around headteacher recruitment and retention through a reformed Headteacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group. The role of this group is to jointly develop, agree and take forward actions to help improve the recruitment and retention of headteachers in Scotland. The group is committed to engaging regularly with practitioners in order to inform and progress its work. In April and May 2022 the group held a series of 'reference group' meetings with existing and aspiring headteachers to provide a platform to discuss the challenges and opportunities of headship and to inform a plan of action on the employment and retention of headteachers. The plan of action is currently under development.

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

Recommendation 8. The Committee supports the emphasis on the need for meaningful engagement of teachers, parents and carers, children and young people and other key stakeholders throughout the processes of planning, implementing and evaluating approaches for spending PEF. Protected time for headteachers and teachers is key to creating space for such engagement. The Committee asks the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that headteachers have the capacity to work with teachers, parents, carers and pupils to consults them in a meaningful way on the deployment of PEF within their schools.

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- We recognise the immeasurable value that working with children and young people and the wider community can bring. There is work underway to assess how best to engage with children and young people from the most disadvantaged background to ensure that they have a voice on how the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme operates and how it is evaluated.
- In recently updated Scottish Attainment Challenge National Operational guidance for our key funding programmes, Pupil Equity Funding, Strategic Equity Funding and the Care Experienced and Children and Young People Fund, we emphasise the importance of meaningfully engaging with children, young people and the community throughout the processes of planning, implementing and evaluating initiatives. This is taking place in many innovative and engaging ways in schools across Scotland.

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Education Scotland has developed resources to empower headteachers to include young people's voices when developing initiatives to help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

- We encourage participatory budgeting as one way to support meaningful pupil voice by giving pupils a say in the decisions which affect them, but it is also a way to encourage active citizenship and positive participation in their local communities.
- Education Scotland's Attainment Advisors play a key role in working with local authorities and schools to ensure the aims of the national guidance in this respect are highlighted and can be achieved at local level. Education Scotland recently published a national resource Pupil Equity Funding: Looking inwards, outwards, forwards which includes guidance and good practice examples on ensuring children, young people and parents are included in decision making about PEF. Attainment Advisors hold regular PEF clinics for headteachers and school staff also.
- Our especially important partnerships with key National Programmes are instrumental in developing approaches to engage with children and young people and support learner voices. We are therefore establishing a mechanism to ensure young people's views help inform, influence and contribute to the work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. This project will be utilised to support learner voice in a school environment, encouraging engagement with young learners across Scotland.
- We are only too aware of the devastating impact poverty can have on our children and young people. This should not also act as a barrier to learning. Another key partner, supported by the Scottish Attainment Challenge is being supported to enhance their work to support more children and young people to develop the skills to lead on raising awareness of the cost of the school day in their own school communities.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- We agree on the importance of ensuring the voices of classroom teachers, parents, carers and children and young people are central to decision making and planning for attainment challenge spending.
- It is important to note that the duty to ensure this happens lies with local authorities and headteachers and that the UNCRC applies equally to them as they carry out their duties. Recognising this is an important aspect of the ways in which the Scottish Government has empowered schools and local authorities to make decisions within the parameters of national guidance but taking account of their own local context.

The importance of local monitoring is key to building capacity through the knowledge of those who know best what is working in their local areas.

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National Scottish Attainment Challenge guidance to local authorities and schools makes clear an expectation that teachers, parents, carers and children and young people are meaningfully engaged in the processes of planning, implementing and reviewing approaches or initiatives undertaken as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Education Scotland has a key role in providing professional advice and support in this aspect. Through their link role with each local authority, Attainment Advisors work directly to support and challenge local authorities and schools to promote and exemplify how they meet their responsibilities as set out in the range of national guidance for the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

We will ensure that guidance on this important issue is strengthened in future national guidance for the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

- Education Scotland has published a range of resources and guidance material to support schools to improve learner participation. These include “Learner Participation in Educational Settings 3-18” and the recently published “Scotland’s Equity Toolkit” which also includes guidance and resources to support parental engagement in attainment challenge decisions. We recognise there is still work to do to ensure this aspect of the national guidance is consistently strong across Scotland. Education Scotland will therefore continue to strengthen the support and challenge provided to schools and local authorities, including through targeted work where it is needed and continued engagement with teachers, parents, carers and children and young people during school inspections.
- HMIE also routinely engage with staff, parents and children and young people through questionnaires and focus groups during all establishment inspections. Although this work is not solely focused on attainment challenge spending, it does provide important insight into a school’s practice, which can be taken into account within inspection findings.

## **Consistency and sharing best practice**

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The Scottish Government, Education Scotland, COSLA, and ADES are already working together to plan our respective and shared actions to tackle variation in outcomes for young people. As part of that, the Scottish Government and Education Scotland are looking at what more we need to do to understand what works to drive improvement

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across all parts of the education system, and how we can make better use of data to help reduce variation in outcomes achieved by young people in different parts of the country. This formed part of the recent consultation on enhanced data collection for improvement, the outcome of which will help inform the development of the 2023 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan.

- Alongside this, given their duty for the provision and improvement of school education, local authorities are also working independently and collaboratively, including in RICs, to further understand what more can be done to improve education in all parts of the country.
- This work is being taken forward collaboratively with Education Scotland, ADES, COSLA and Scottish Government with a focus on looking at how we can address unacceptable variation in outcomes for learners across Scotland. This is an extremely complex issue linked to geographical, demographic, historical and capacity issues within local authorities alongside the wider societal impacts. Addressing the variation in outcomes therefore requires collective responsibility remembering that the primary responsibility for improvement lies with local government with appropriate support and challenge from Education Scotland. Given the range of action underway to address this issues, Scottish Government and Education Scotland can of course provide further updates to the Committee six months from now. The Committee may wish also to hear from COSLA and/or ADES on this on this issue.
- To support recovery and accelerating progress Education Scotland is focusing significant work on strengthening use of data and evidence to inform planning and delivery of support and challenge across Scotland. Education Scotland is currently working with RICS, LAs and with Scottish Government colleagues to seek ways of improving consistency and use of national and local data.
- In partnership with ADES and recognising the responsibilities of Councils for the quality of local education provision, Education Scotland has been carrying out Collaborative Improvement work in 13 local authorities in the past year. Plans are in place for this work to expand across all 32 local authorities as they, with the support of Education Scotland, look to drive local improvement: 10 more are planned for this academic year and 9 in the following year. This joint programme supports local authorities to evaluate and plan improvement, with support from Education Scotland staff and peer colleagues from across Scotland, of an identified priority or wicked issue where improvement in outcomes has proved challenging. Each collaborative improvement engagement involves robust self-evaluation, analysis of data and evidence and robust dialogue to support development of a locally owned report and an action plan through which additional peer and Education Scotland support can be aligned to the local authority.
- As embedded within the new Scottish Attainment Challenge Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress, Education Scotland is now introducing a model of resource deployment which takes account of local performance and capacity to improve. This model of universal, targeted and intensive support means that all local authorities will continue to benefit from a wide-ranging support offer including from a dedicated Attainment Advisor and access to national professional learning and leadership programmes. Targeted support will be provided to local authorities and schools with the most need. This may be those with the highest levels of poverty or others depending

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on the data and contextual analysis. Intensive support will be provided to local authorities and schools where there is a consistent barrier and no, or very limited, progress is being made to improving outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty. This model of support is being implemented from 2022/23 and will continue to be developed alongside monitoring progress with stretch aims to address issues and challenges timeously with additional support if necessary.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The Scottish Attainment Challenge programme has been developed and delivered jointly by the Scottish Government and Education Scotland through the empowerment and support of local authorities and headteachers. Supporting headteachers and class teachers to understand the practice approaches which are most successful in closing the poverty related attainment gap is central to the Attainment Advisor role, which the committee heard a lot about during the Education Scotland evidence session. Attainment Advisors provide advice and guidance based on research and evidence about what works. This advice and exemplification of good practice is shared in a range of ways including national publications and resources which are accessed through the national improvement hub, and professional learning activities which are available to all schools and local authorities universally, and are often bespoke and targeted to specific contexts.
- In response to feedback from educators Education Scotland has now developed Scotland's Equity Toolkit, launched in September 2022. This toolkit draws in examples of effective practice and a range of professional learning activities which support teachers and other educators to understand best practice in learning, teaching and assessment, leadership and in working with families and communities.
- All local authorities have a link Attainment Advisor who provides bespoke support, advice and guidance. Education Scotland's Signposting Equity Sway is a regular bulletin through which recent research is shared widely alongside links to professional learning activities. All levels of the system benefit from Education Scotland's professional learning and leadership programmes, all of which include a relevant focus on understanding equity and approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. These are constantly being reviewed and revised to maintain relevance.
- An important feature of Education Scotland's support for the Scottish Attainment Challenge is regular opportunities for headteachers and local authority staff to come together to share practice and discuss what is working well. Prior to the pandemic

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Education Scotland and Scottish Government delivered regular regional and national conferences specifically aimed at sharing practice and collaborative learning. Education Scotland also host a quarterly meeting with local authority officers who lead on SAC work in their local context. These events are specifically aimed at sharing practice. A recent example is the event held on 31<sup>st</sup> August when representatives from all local authorities came together to share approaches and progress in setting stretch aims. Since the outbreak of the pandemic these events have continued on-line. We are considering the merits of re-establishing such in-person events for 2022-23 and beyond and testing our more hybrid options. The Scottish Learning Festival taking place mid-September 2022 includes 6 live regional events for educators across Scotland. The event held in Dundee will include a live and streamed debate on the poverty-related attainment gap.

- It is important to also note the key responsibility that local authorities have for school improvement and the importance of collaboration at local level. Regional Improvement Collaboratives were established to bring together local authorities and Education Scotland to develop different ways of working and bring together capacity across a region to help deliver excellence and equity in education. How this works in practice was provided to the Committee through the evidence from members of the West Partnership. The Committee may wish to explore this further through engagement with other RICs in the future.
- The Scottish Government will continue to work with Education Scotland to ensure that effective practice is shared timeously and widely and exemplifies what works in a range of contexts including to support those working through the challenges of rural poverty. How this can be further improved will also be considered within the work to establish the new Agency for Scottish education.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- RICs were established following the Scottish Government's consultation on education governance and reform, during 2016 and 2017. Regional Improvement Collaboratives are not formal bodies within the education system. They are collaborative groupings of local authorities working together to support improvement in recognition of the added value of collectively pulling of resources and expertise and working closely with Education Scotland who also provide knowledge and expertise to support this collaborative approach to improvement. They are not legal entities. As such, HM Inspectors do not currently have a responsibility for evaluating RICs as entities.
- However, I have asked the Chief Inspector to scope out whether a thematic review could be undertaken to evaluate the impact of RICs in session 2023/24.

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- The Scottish Government commissioned an external review of Regional Improvement Collaboratives, and published Review of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives in 2021. A central aim of these reforms is to ensure coherence and clarity on the support provided by our national agencies to schools and practitioners. This will require close and effective working across all parts of the system, and the detailed development of our new agencies, including for the independent Inspectorate, will consider their future role and relationships with RICs and other local government partners as part of that process and including any future necessary amendments to legislation.

## **Life outside school and the role of the third sector**

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The new SAC Framework launched in March 2022 re-emphasizes the importance of strong partnerships at local level to support children and young people most impacted by poverty. We recognise that the challenge of closing the poverty-related attainment gap and indeed improving outcomes for those learners cannot be achieved by schools alone. For the first time since the outset of the Scottish Attainment Challenge we have given a sound assurance of multi-year funding to schools and local authorities. This is to enable more, longer term planning, including for schools to engage with their partners to ensure continuity in approaches. This long term commitment should provide greater stability for third sector and community partners engaged by schools and local authorities to work collaboratively to close the poverty related attainment gap. Scottish Government monitors this through routine reporting on the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Education Scotland Attainment Advisors work with schools and local authorities to support effective use of Attainment Scotland Funding.
- Most of the Attainment Scotland Fund is devolved to schools in the form of Pupil Equity Funding. Headteachers are empowered to make their own local decisions about how this money is used with support and challenge from both their local authority and Education Scotland with regard to the impact of their plans. Wider decisions about local authority funding are the responsibility of local councils who also have a duty to support and challenge their local education department to ensure effective partnership working and positive educational outcomes for all young people.
- Monitoring spending decisions within Councils across Scotland is not a function of Education Scotland. The role of Audit Scotland in monitoring local authority spend and approaches may be more beneficial in this regard and therefore the Committee may

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wish to explore this further. Education Scotland Attainment Advisors will continue to work with local authorities to support effective use of the Attainment Scotland Fund and ensure that local authority decision making is in line with national guidance for the various strands of the Fund, including third sector spending. This includes emphasising the need to ensure sustainability of third sector partnerships where they are proving to make a difference to children and families. Attainment Advisors also report on the effectiveness of partnerships to support improved outcomes. Professional dialogue on this aspect features in discussions with HTs about their use of PEF and setting out clear outcomes and measures for evaluating the impact of partnerships. Further the Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation strategy for 2022/23 onwards will include some analysis of work undertaken by the third sector to achieve the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The evaluation to date has had a focus on collaboration, with the Year 6 Evaluation Report showing evidence of the benefits of increased collaboration as a result of the ASF, supporting a focus on improving outcomes for CYP affected by poverty; with evidence of ongoing developments to support collaborations in a number of contexts and between different levels of the education system, including strategic and more practice-oriented approaches.

## Pupil Equity Funding

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- Since its introduction in 2017-18 PEF allocations have been distributed at a rate of £1,200 per pupil in P1-S3 registered for free school meals. The number of pupils registered for has been calculated using free school meal data from the Healthy Living Survey (HLS) and pupil numbers from the Pupil Census to ensure a robust, consistent and fair distribution, using the most up-to-date free school meal registration data available across all local authorities. To protect schools “smoothing” has been applied annually to minimise fluctuations in allocations at school level by ensuring each year individual school allocations do not drop below 90% of the previous year’s allocation.
- We have listened to feedback from headteachers about seeking longer term certainty over PEF and, for the first time, we have indicated PEF allocations for four years. This provides more certainty for headteachers, to assist their planning both in the short and longer term. Also, in recognition of the fluctuating demand as a result of the pandemic we have increased PEF from £1,200 to £1,225 for each pupil registered for free school meals. This means that PEF allocations will remain the same each year up until March 2026.
- The 2020 Healthy Living Survey was used to determine the 2022/23 PEF allocations as that was the latest data we had available at the time, based upon the existing PEF methodology. Unfortunately the 2021 HLS did not collect Free School Meal data due to

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COVID-19 related disruption to schools, and the 2022 HLS data was not yet finalised, meaning we would not have had that ready in time for publication of those allocations.

- We recognise that expansion of free school meal provision, as part of the most generous free school meal offer in the UK, means that we need to look again at appropriate data for determining relative need in schools. We have begun a programme of work to identify and establish suitable alternative datasets such as social security data, and in particular the Children in Low Income Families dataset.
- The Scottish Government has made a request to the UK Government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to explore the possibility of securing access to such alternative data. We will continue to liaise and discuss this project with DWP, with a view to producing a suitable dataset which could act as an appropriate basis for allocation of deprivation-based school funding. I shall keep the Committee informed with developments on this engagement and work.

## Additionality

Recommendation 15. The Committee considers that greater clarity on the level of discretion available in relation to additionality would be helpful for school leaders in determining how to spend these funds. Such clarity would also be helpful to those who ought to be part of the decision-making process at the school level, i.e. pupils, parents/carers and teachers.

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The guidance for the use of Attainment Scotland Funding is clear that this funding must be targeted to support children and young people impacted by poverty and that local data and knowledge can be used to inform those decisions. We know that school leaders and local authorities know their pupils and communities best when determining how the money should be spent to best effect.
- We are clear in the operational guidance for Pupil Equity Funding, Strategic Equity Funding and Care Experienced Children and Young People funding that pupils and their families should be consulted as part of local processes to develop approaches for the use of the funding, with the proviso that the funding is targeted according to need.

## Rural schools

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

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## *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- By introducing Strategic Equity Funding and distributing it using Children in Low Income Families data, we now have a funding distribution that reaches all local authorities in Scotland. Further, recognising the relatively small numbers of Children in Low Income Families in the most rural local authorities, we have ensured that no local authority receives less than £100,000 per year as the Strategic Equity Funding allocations taper upwards over the four years of the programme.
- Further, Pupil Equity Funding reaches 97% of schools in Scotland, ensuring a very high degree of coverage in both rural and urban settings.
- All local authorities have a dedicated Attainment Advisor who brings a deep knowledge of the local context, including in rural areas, along with an understanding of how poverty impacts differently in urban and rural areas. Education Scotland is currently working to support local authorities in setting their stretch aims, as part of which appropriate adjustments to the Framework requirements have been discussed and agreed to take account of the demographics of rural areas. In particular, for example, where the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) profile is not distributed across all quintiles we are working with each local authority individually to support and understand how they can effectively measure their poverty related gaps and work collaboratively to address them.
- However, we recognise the challenges faced by rural authorities and communities and will work with stakeholders to understand how through the Scottish Attainment Challenge we can further help mitigate any particular barriers to learning or positive outcomes caused specifically by rural poverty.
- In our partnerships with key National Programmes, we help fund initiatives to support rural authorities. Through the SAC supported Cost of the School Day project, a three-year partnership was developed with Moray Council and the Northern Alliance, helping reach rural and island communities to emphasise the impact of cost of the school day challenges in rural schools and communities, and implement strategies to mitigate this for our learners.

## **MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

### **Monitoring and evaluation – conclusions**

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

## *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

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- We know local authorities are rigorously reviewing their own data and evidence to inform their local stretch aims and expect that they have plans in place to monitor progress towards them. We also expect that they will be working collaboratively across RICs and other channels, like ADES, to peer review and/or share practice as they look to assure themselves that they are taking the right steps to improve. Further, local elected members will similarly be seeking such assurance for themselves.

Between April and September this year, following the launch of the Framework, Education Scotland has undertaken an extensive programme of support and challenge engaging with all local authorities in their work to set new stretch aims. This has involved working with local authorities to analyse recent attainment and achievement data and over time both pre- and post-pandemic. On 31st August Education Scotland hosted two events with ADES where local authorities shared information about their process and their draft stretch aims. Once stretch aims are submitted by 30th September, Senior Regional Advisors and Attainment Advisors will continue to engage in regular dialogue with local authorities to monitor progress towards the stretch aims as set out in the roles and responsibilities section of the Framework. The whole process is therefore underpinned by robust support and challenge, effective use of data to achieve the aims set.

The stretch aims submitted by local authorities will, as the Committee notes, be developed within a “core plus” model. This means that for the “core” aims, all authorities will be setting aims for the same sub-set of National Improvement Framework measures. This will ensure a degree of consistency that will enable a national aggregation of those aims, which will inform a national understanding of the ambition and expected pace of progress across the country. This is not a national target – it is a reflection of the collective ambitions of local authorities, based on robust local data and evidence. This national picture based on the underlying stretch aims will be published later in the year.

- Alongside these “core” aims, in recognition that there are a range of contexts across all 32 local authorities, local authorities are developing a range of “plus” aims that reflect their own local priorities and approaches to tackling the poverty related attainment gap. Whilst these will not be aggregated, given the likely range of approaches, they will be a valuable source of information nationally to understand where local priorities lie and for local communities to understand local ambitions and activities to support children and young people impacted by poverty. I would expect that local stretch aims will be published in some form locally too.

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

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### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- This recommendation is already in hand and is core to the success of SAC to date. Education Scotland’s Attainment Advisors play a key role in supporting local authorities to develop appropriate plans identifying the outcomes they are looking for from interventions and setting out appropriate measures. Every local authority benefits from a dedicated link Attainment Advisor. By December 2022-23 we will develop and pilot a new strategy to support “Effective Use of Data” to deepen knowledge and understanding at all levels. The strategy being developed will focus on implementation of a Data Cycle, focused on supporting effective use of data for planning and monitoring improvement.
- In addition, every local authority has a link National Improvement Framework Officer to support improvement planning, data analysis, self-evaluation, quality assessment and moderation and a deepening understanding of the range of NIF drivers and how they support continuous improvement. Senior Regional Advisors and Strategic Directors provide ongoing strategic support and challenge to Directors of Education and senior local authority leaders.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- As part of the development of the 2023 NIF, we are looking to produce a more parent/carers and young person friendly version of the publication, which will be designed to help support their understanding of the key data.

### **Role of the HM Inspectorate of Education**

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- Inspection provides a crucial tool to support improvement in the education system as well as providing public assurance on the quality of education provision as experienced by children and young people. HM Inspectors currently evaluate and report on the

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extent to which individual schools are meeting the needs of all learners, including those most impacted by poverty. 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. Findings are shared in published reports for each school.

- HM Inspectors also published a national thematic report specifically focused on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The report drew 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 focused 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.
- Education inspection evidence offers a crucial source of data for improvement and has a key role in giving assurance about the quality of education children and young people experience.
- As recommended by Professor Ken Muir, the new Inspectorate body provides an opportunity to develop a new approach to “collate and share data and other intelligence on what is working well and what needs to improve and identify any barriers in the system”, and to better understand how inspection data is used more effectively for internal collaboration around professional learning and all system improvement.
- The independent inspectorate will support improvement, evaluate major changes in the education system and report on the performance of Scottish education, of which the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap is a key aspect.

## Longitudinal study

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation strategy is currently being updated in light of the refreshed SAC, as announced in March 2022.
- The evaluation refresh consists of reviewing the overall evaluation aims and objectives; drafting the evaluation questions following the recent review of the SAC Programme Logic Model; and considering evidence needs and sources. Part of the refreshed evaluation strategy includes a plan to explore a thematic research approach to interventions for equity funded by the SAC, i.e. what types of interventions work for whom, in what circumstances.

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- An external advisory panel will support the development of the new evaluation strategy and continue to provide advice throughout the length of the evaluation. The panel will provide advice and expert input on evaluation approaches and methodology, including carefully considering the use of a longitudinal approach, and I shall keep the Committee updated with developments.

## Positive destinations

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- The Committee highlighted the importance of understanding young people's outcomes and experiences after they leave school. Positive destination statistics provide an important measure of the destinations of young people after leaving school. They provide the proportion of school leavers who were in a positive destination on a given day 3 months after the end of the school year (initial destinations) and on a given day 9 months after the end of the school year (follow-up destinations). Positive destinations include Higher Education, Further Education, Employment, Training, Voluntary Work and Personal Skills Development.
- The Annual Participation Measure (APM) is the key measure of sustained destinations for young people used in the National Improvement Framework and for the Scottish Attainment Challenge. This provides a measure of sustained positive destinations for all young people aged 16-19 (as opposed to school leavers) and is based on the activity within which an individual spent the greatest amount of time over the course of a year (rather than on what they were doing on a single day). As with school leaver destination statistics it has shown a narrowing of the gap between young people from the most and least deprived areas participating in education, training and employment. The gap has narrowed from 10.8 percentage points in 2018 to 9.3 percentage points in 2022.
- The priorities and actions in the 2022 National Improvement Framework build on those from last year, and also take account of existing and new data in order to ensure that we have a coherent delivery plan to secure improvement. A formal consultation on enhanced data collection for improvement, and the key measures to assess progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap was published on Monday 9 May and ran until 18 July. The responses to the consultation will ensure that the key measures provide an accurate understanding of the wide range of learners' achievement, and support a fuller understanding of the gaps in achievement and life chances between different groups of learners.

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

### *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- Positive destinations definition, data capture and tracking is the responsibility of Skills Development Scotland who co-ordinate this through the Data Hub and publish the statistics. There is a role for Education Scotland in raising awareness of the importance of the Annual Participation Measure, the analysis and use of the data to inform planning and interventions, and what it means in and across local authorities and in supporting the pathways that lead to sustained post school participation. The participation gap is closely aligned to the attainment gap so addressing one will go some way to addressing the other, which requires a partnership approach to be effective. Education Scotland therefore works in partnership with Skills Development Scotland to achieve this.
- Education Scotland has a key role to provide support and challenge to schools and colleges in terms of opportunities available to young people and encourage collaboration to enhance the range of possibilities within the learner journey and meets the needs of all young people so that initial school leaver destinations are sustained and build upon. We have included the participation measure as one of the core stretch aims for all local authorities within the Framework of Recovery and Accelerating Progress to increase the focus on this important measure and encourage increased collaboration to improve it.
- Along with the NIF Consultation findings, Growing Up in Scotland, which is the Scottish Government's flagship longitudinal study following a nationally representative cohort of children, may also offer us useful information in the future on young people who have left school. Information is currently being collected on participants aged 17 and, depending on response rates, will most likely follow up again with this group of young people when they are aged 20 or, alternatively, use data linkage to track their progress using administrative data. The evaluation refresh described above may also offer further scope for involving young people.

## **Accountability**

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

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## *Scottish Government and Education Scotland Position*

- In addressing this point, it is important to note the responsibilities of Education Scotland set out within the Framework relate to current work. Although the new Agency will of course have an important role to play there is an imperative for Education Scotland as the current national improvement agency to continue to drive forward the aims of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the organisation continues to do so. Examples of this include the significant work to ensure all local authorities have stretch aims in place by the end of September 2022 and the introduction of the new model of universal, targeted and intensive support – a comprehensive offer of support to local authorities, informed by data and context, designed to support local improvement. Education Scotland thereby provides a package of support which local authorities can choose to accept or otherwise. If the data indicates a significant need for improvement Education Scotland can only work alongside the local authority to support improvement. The responsibility for improvement lies with the Council. The Scottish Attainment Challenge remains a key priority for Education Scotland and implementing the new Framework underpins that. This is highlighted in the Education Scotland Corporate Plan 2022-24 which will be published by the end of September.
- The development of the new agencies for Scottish education provides an opportunity to clarify the role and responsibilities of each of the national agencies but also the wider stakeholders delivering education across Scotland. Professor Muir's report recommends that the new Agency for Scottish education should be performance led with a strengthened focus on data for planning and delivering support to Scottish education according to need. As the work to develop the new Agency evolves we will continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure that the Agency is designed with users in mind and able to provide the clarity and drive that Professor Muir recommends.

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