

## **Written Submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee: Scottish Attainment Challenge**

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### **About us**

The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, with almost 400 members from across civil society, and including people with direct experience of poverty. Our vision is of a sustainable Scotland free of poverty, with dignity and social and economic justice for all. To help contribute to achieving that vision we seek to work with individuals, organisations and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources.

#### **1. The poverty-attainment gap: the context**

The attainment gap in Scotland starts in the early years and widens as children and young people move through the education system. From the early years, the attainment gap is stark: in 2019/20, there was a 13.9 percentage point gap in records of development concerns for infants aged 27-30 between the least and most deprived areas in Scotland. Upon leaving school, just over two in five living in the most deprived areas achieve one or more Highers (43.5%) compared to almost four in five young people living in the least deprived areas (79.3%) (2018/19). Young people living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are also four times more likely to be excluded from school and have lower attendance levels.<sup>i</sup> Several of the National Improvement Framework measures have not been published since Covid. However, 2020/21 data on primary school achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels shows that gaps in numeracy and literacy between primary pupils living in the most and least deprived areas has widened since 2018/19 and is now wider than at any point since 2016/17.

There are specific groups of children and young people who are most affected by the attainment gap. Care experienced learners, children with additional support needs and Gypsy/Travellers are particularly marginalised groups. White boys living in the most deprived areas in Scotland also achieve lower levels of education attainment in comparison to their peers.<sup>ii</sup> Rural poverty is also a significant issue affecting educational outcomes in Scotland, with the centralisation of services in rural areas - allied with limited and high-cost transport options - creating specific barriers to young people accessing training, education and employment.

#### **2. Covid-19 impacts on the attainment gap**

Even before the pandemic, over one million people in Scotland – including one in four children – were living in poverty. Covid-19 has, however, exacerbated levels of poverty in Scotland, resulting in precarious household circumstances for low-income families including not being able to afford regular, basic needs such as food and clothing.<sup>iii</sup> Covid has presented significant digital exclusion barriers for low-income

families, and has negatively impacted on children and young people's mental health.<sup>iv</sup> As well as the closure of schools impacting on children and young people's attainment, the removal of many different forms of 'out of school' provision was felt acutely by priority family groups, particularly lone parent families.<sup>v</sup> Community support from local third sector organisations has been particularly important in supporting low-income families during Covid.<sup>vi</sup>

### 3. Scottish Attainment Challenge

#### ***What has worked well in addressing attainment to date?***

Evaluations of the Scottish Attainment Fund have highlighted positive examples of effective practice. The most recent year five (2019/20) evaluation highlights positive perceptions of improvements in closing the poverty-related attainment gap amongst teachers and headteachers, particularly linked to perceived change in culture/ethos. Many schools in Scotland have embedded nurturing approaches, focused on wellbeing and relationships. Research on nurture groups has demonstrated positive impacts on social, emotional and behavioural outcomes for children.<sup>vii</sup> However, the impact on attainment needs robust evaluation. Pupil Equity Funding has been experienced positively by schools: most Headteachers (89%) report that the PEF has provided additional resource needed to address the poverty-related attainment gap and that the PEF supports provision that is responsive to local context and needs.<sup>viii</sup>

#### ***What could improve?***

- **Robust evidence at national level on effective interventions:** Whilst evidence-based interventions are developed by local authorities using available evidence from organisations such as the Education Endowment Fund, qualitative research with stakeholders involved in planning and delivering interventions identified the need to have robust evidence at national level to support the selection of interventions.<sup>ix</sup>
- **Reducing child poverty and policies to address the impact of poverty on participation in education:** Income inadequacy is a key and defining barrier that impacts on children and young people being able to fully participate in education. To address the root causes of the attainment gap, the Scottish Government must continue its commitment to end child poverty in the new Child Poverty Delivery Plan. As set out by the Poverty and Inequality Commission, no single policy on its own can eradicate child poverty but more action is needed to bolster incomes through the Scottish Child Payment and ensure that families get information about all the benefits they are entitled to in school and health settings.<sup>x</sup> Initiatives seeking to reduce the attainment gap should put reducing financial barriers at the centre. Aside from the Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the

School Day Programme, there is a limited evidence base around models of practices that address poverty in school settings.

- **Improve evidence base on health and wellbeing interventions:** NHS Health Scotland were asked to identify and review international health and wellbeing interventions in school settings that contribute to reducing inequalities to develop evidence-based programmes within the Equity Framework. This review highlighted the lack of conclusive evidence on health and wellbeing interventions that have the potential to impact on inequalities in educational outcomes in the UK.<sup>xi</sup>
- **Improve access to additional educational instruction outside of school:** There is a strong evidence base on the effectiveness of additional educational instruction outside of school (tutoring, after school clubs, extra lessons). However, there are a lack of programmes that provide these interventions at school-level in Scotland.<sup>xii</sup>
- **Consistent, longer-term funding for third sector organisations:** third sector organisations provide critical support to children and young people in partnership with schools across local authorities in Scotland. However, short-term funding and reporting requirements severely challenge the delivery of relationship-based support for children and young people.<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/socioeconomic-inequalities-in-school-attendance-in-scotland-resea>

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/pages/8/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Poverty-related-Attainment-Gap-A-Review-of-the-Evidence-11Feb2021.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TPA\\_GHS\\_Project\\_Research\\_Report\\_FINAL\\_proof\\_02-1.pdf](https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TPA_GHS_Project_Research_Report_FINAL_proof_02-1.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.cso.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/COVEDI2016-1.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> <https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/en/publications/family-experiences-of-navigating-out-of-school-provision-in-inver>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/GHS\\_Weathering\\_the\\_Storm\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/GHS_Weathering_the_Storm_Summary_Report.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://nasenjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2009.00445.x>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/attainment-scotland-fund-evaluation-headteacher-survey-2020-report/documents/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/31284/2/00532726.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> [https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Advice-on-the-SGs-Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-2022-26\\_EXEC-SUMMARY\\_Jan2022.pdf](https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Advice-on-the-SGs-Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-2022-26_EXEC-SUMMARY_Jan2022.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1694/reducing-the-attainment-gap-the-role-of-health-and-wellbeing-interventions-in-schools.pdf>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Poverty-Alliance-Mentoring-and-Tutoring-ReviewFINALv2.pdf>

<sup>xiii</sup> [Bernardos\\_Report.pdf](Bernardos_Report.pdf) ([scottishinsight.ac.uk](http://scottishinsight.ac.uk))