

Response to the recommendations for COSLA from the Education and Skills Committee inquiry into the attainment and achievement of school age children experiencing poverty

We very much welcome the Committee's report as a valuable contribution in all our efforts to close the poverty related attainment gap. You will be aware from our written submission and from evidence from local government colleagues that local authorities are fully committed to reducing the gap in attainment between children from low income families and those from better off backgrounds. As we set out in our submission there is a significant amount of effort and investment every day in Scottish education aimed at reducing this gap.

The Committee requested that we respond in detail to the recommendations contained in the report and we have attempted to do this with the information we have available. It would however be very difficult to represent the wide-ranging activity which takes place daily in local authorities, schools and nurseries to ensure that poverty is not a barrier to attainment and achievement for any child or young person. At the same time, we recognise that more needs to be done and every effort made to continue to make progress on closing the educational attainment gap.

COSLA would also like to highlight the work taking place across local authorities to meet the requirements of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. As the Committee will be aware the Act sets ambitious targets to reduce child poverty by 2030 and introduces a requirement for NHS Boards and local authorities to report jointly, on an annual basis, on their actions to address child poverty to achieve the targets. Work is ongoing in developing these local action plans to be published by June 2019 where there will be explicit links between education/children's services and wider work to reduce levels of child poverty. Whilst all of those involved in the education of our children and young people have a central role to play in alleviating poverty and inequality there is a need to recognise the importance of wider work across the public sector to reduce child poverty.

Response to specific recommendations

- *The Committee notes that since 2016, education authorities have had a legal duty to have regard to social disadvantage in new strategic decisions. However, this does not cover either existing policies such as the structure of the school year or more operational decisions such as the increasing use of digital platforms. The Committee recommends that during standard review processes of their schools, education authorities should undertake impact assessments on existing policies and associated practices to assess the impact on low-income families.*

The Education (Scotland) Act 2016 places a duty on local authorities to have due regard to the need to carry out its functions relating to school education pupils who experience those inequalities as a result of socio-economic disadvantage.

Whilst this is a new duty which applies from when the Act received Royal Assent it is important to recognise that a great deal of activity has taken place at local authority and school level prior to the legislation being enacted. The work of many local authorities and schools in 'poverty proofing' decision making is demonstrated through participation in the Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the School day initiative.

Recognising and reducing the impact of the cost of the school day on those children and young people living in poverty is a crucial part of a strategic approach to reducing the poverty related attainment gap.

Local authorities are committed to ensuring that all strategic and practical measures that can be taken to support children and young people experiencing poverty in getting the most from their education are taken. **We have discussed this with the Association of Directors of Education (ADES) and we agree with the Committee's recommendation.**

- *The Committee further recommends that education authorities ensure that school leaders are mindful of potential impacts of school practice on families with low incomes and are equipped to undertake equality impact assessments if necessary.*

In our submission to the Committee inquiry we noted that poverty is a complex and multi-faceted issue which requires a co-ordinated response. In addition, we made the point that it is not solely for schools to address issues of poverty and inequality.

At the same time those working in education are acutely aware of their responsibilities to ensure that school practice only has a positive impact on all families but particularly those on low incomes. As such local authorities are well aware of the role that they have in supporting school leaders to consider all of the impacts of school practice.

Devolution of responsibility for decision making in relation to many aspects of education in schools is currently at the heart of the reform agenda and COSLA and the wider local government family are working closely with the Scottish Government and others on taking this work forward. **The Committee's recommendation reflects the need for the local authority to retain a strategic role in the delivery of education and ensure that school leaders remain mindful of the impact of school practice on low income families.**

- *The Committee is concerned that Joseph Rowntree Foundation found a significant difference in the outcomes for young people from deprived communities depending on where they live, specifically which local authority they live in. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government and COSLA work together to analyse these findings and report back to the Committee by the end of 2018 on the basis for this disparity and the actions that require to be taken.*

COSLA and the Scottish Government have jointly discussed this recommendation with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). It is our shared understanding that the disparity highlighted by JRF is that some authorities with higher levels of deprivation are faring better in tackling the attainment gap than those with lower levels of deprivation. The key finding is that looking at average attainment for young people living in the most and least deprived neighbourhoods reveals a highly uneven picture with young people from similarly deprived places attaining at twice the level of others depending on which local authority they live.

The JRF acknowledge that there are difficulties in comparing city and urban authorities with remote and rural authorities and that comparing similar authorities and trends in authorities over time is more effective.

There are limitations in using area deprivation as a measure of poverty. Even within one local authority area a given proportion of low income families will be living in SIMD1 whilst others don't. Analysis of the SIMD 2016 estimated that nine tenths of income deprived people do not live in deprived areas. In particular, while analysis shows that rural councils tend to be progressing at a slower rate in closing the attainment gap, it is recognised that it is especially difficult to effectively capture rural deprivation. Highlands and Islands Enterprise, for example, estimate that minimum acceptable standards of living require income of a tenth to a third more in remote rural areas, which is difficult to account for in national indicators.

Care also must be taken with the small numbers involved in some cases. For example, in 2016/17 one rural authority only had 10 pupils in SIMD1 and is rated as one of the best performing councils. Even averaging over 3 years it is clear that there is some volatility in the results.

Despite the caveats with the data the JRF analysis provides a useful reference point for progress on attainment. At present we can only speculate on the reasons for the disparity. Areas with high concentrations of poverty have received more funding through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), including the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF). Staff in these areas will also have more experience in dealing with the impact of poverty and inequality on children, young people and their families. Rural authorities also face very different challenges in relation to transport and infrastructure as well as difficulties in recruiting staff.

It is well documented that COSLA were opposed to the effective ringfencing of education funding through SAC and PEF. We were concerned that the lack of a strategic application of PEF funding creates uncertainty and a lack of clarity on how effective this spending will be.

We would fully expect that at this stage in the journey to reduce the attainment gap there will be differences in the rate of improvement in local authority areas. Whilst it is difficult to be definitive with the information we have available, as highlighted above this could be due to how data is gathered, levels of deprivation, funding, infrastructure, geography or experience in dealing with often complex and challenging issues.

It is also important to note that local authorities and schools are operating in a changing environment. We are currently undergoing an intensive process of implementing the joint agreement on education reform with all local authorities committed to working with the Scottish Government on our shared ambition to close the unacceptable gap in attainment between our least and most disadvantaged children. The aim is to ensure that no child, regardless of their background or where they live is left behind. As more information becomes available on the National Improvement Framework, and the BGE benchmarking tool and Insight, we may be better able to identify the reason for the differences.

In addition to the wider reform agenda Regional Improvement Collaboratives have recently submitted their second set of plans on the activity they will be undertaking to help build capacity and share good practice across local authorities. We would expect

that as this work goes forward local authorities will learn more from each other on what works well to tackle the attainment gap.

There is a general acceptance that empowerment and the reform agenda will drive progress in educational terms in relation to attainment. It should also be recognised that progress will also be affected by action taken by other partners such such as health and increasingly by the third sector.

- *The Committee considers that excessively expensive or unnecessary pieces of school uniform should not be required. Reducing the complexity of school uniforms would reduce the cost burden of education on families. The Committee recommends that education authorities invite schools to poverty-proof their uniform policies.*

Local authorities are increasingly aware of the impact of low income and poverty on families ability to pay for and maintain school uniforms. The commitment to introduce a minimum £100 clothing grant has been implemented in every local authority area with a number of authorities going beyond the minimum. Uniform policy varies in different areas but a consistent position across Scotland is that schools are supportive of children and young people who due to poverty do not have a full school uniform.

The work that takes place in many local authority areas and schools also goes beyond uniforms and takes account of the cost of the school day. Schools are increasingly using the Child Poverty Action Group Cost of the School Day Toolkit.

Ensure equal access to opportunities at school and remove barriers to participation and learning for children and young people from low income households.

We have discussed this recommendation with ADES and agree that education authorities will ask schools to build on the work that they are doing in this area and where necessary invite schools to poverty proof school uniform policies.

- *The Committee also recommends that education authorities should consider carefully the evidence received during this inquiry of children who cannot afford to purchase or maintain school uniforms being sent home or chastised for their appearance at school. The Committee hopes this is a limited issue but considers that no pupil should be denied access to education due to the inability to afford school uniform. Schools should have an emphasis on supportive policies that are mindful of young people who, due to poverty, do not have the full school uniform.*

COSLA are surprised to hear that the Committee received evidence that children who cannot afford to purchase or maintain school uniforms being sent home or chastised for their appearance at school. **We fully agree with the Committee that no pupil should be denied access to education due to the inability to afford school uniform.**

It is our experience, supported by feedback from our members, that schools are acutely aware of the impact of poverty on children and young people. There are many examples of where school staff have demonstrated that sensitivity and compassion is at the heart of their approach to supporting children and young people experiencing poverty.

COSLA December 2018