

Public Audit Committee

**3rd Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Thursday, 9
September**

Improving outcomes for young people through school education

Introduction

1. The Public Audit Committee will take evidence today from the Auditor General for Scotland (AGS) on his joint section 23 report with the Accounts Commission [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#), published on 23 March 2021
2. The AGS has prepared a briefing on the key messages from the report which, along with a copy of the report, can be found in the Annexe.

**Clerks to the Committee
6 September 2021**

Annexe

REPORT BY THE AUDITOR GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

1. The joint Auditor General and Accounts Commission report on improving outcomes for young people through school education was published on 23 March

2021. It looks at how effectively Scottish Government, councils and their partners were improving outcomes for young people through school education before the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent impact of the pandemic and the response of the education sector. The report is based on audit work carried out up to early January 2021.

2. Key messages and recommendations from the report are:

- School education in Scotland is not just about exam results. It also aims to improve children and young people's health and wellbeing and support wider outcomes such as vocational qualifications. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected children and young people in many ways, including their learning, wellbeing and economic circumstances. Pupils living in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected by school closures. The report recommends that the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and councils should monitor the short and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on children and young people's learning and wellbeing to inform the development of local and national priorities and targeting of mitigating actions.
- Those involved in planning, delivering and supporting school education were working well together prior to the pandemic. This strong foundation helped them to collaborate to deliver a rapid response to Covid-19 in exceptionally challenging circumstances. The pandemic has also reinforced the importance of school education and other sectors working together to tackle issues which affect young people's life chances and outcomes, such as child poverty and health and wellbeing and the report recommends that recent focus on this needs to continue. The report also recommends that there should continue to be a co-ordinated policy response both within, and across, the Scottish Government and local government when planning to improve longer-term outcomes for children and young people and delivering the education recovery response to the equality impacts of Covid-19.
- At a national level most performance measures have improved but this is inconsistent across the different measures and there is wide variation across councils. The report recommends that Education Scotland, councils and others should work to understand the reasons for variation and to reduce this variability by being more consistent in the application of drivers of

improvement set out in the National Improvement Framework (NIF). In general, measuring progress has been hampered by the cancellation of exams and other data gaps caused by Covid-19. This could create risks around accountability. The report recommends that the Scottish Government should work with stakeholders to agree an approach to dealing with the challenges created by data disruption in 2020 and 2021 which will affect long-term monitoring of progress in achieving policy ambitions around outcomes and the attainment gap.

- The poverty-related attainment gap is still wide and progress in reducing it has been slower than the Scottish Government set out in its aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. Inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and the Scottish Government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities need to be at the core of the response to Covid-19, longer term recovery and improvement. The report recommends that the Scottish Government should continue to lead the development of priorities for education recovery and improvement, being clear about the anticipated outcomes and milestones.
- Both national education policy and the curriculum reflect the importance of different pathways and opportunities, and outcomes beyond exam results for pupils. In recent years there has been an increase in the types of opportunities, awards and qualifications available to children and young people and an increase in the number awarded. However better data is needed to understand if other outcomes that are reflected in national policy and curriculum, such as wellbeing and confidence, are improving. That data should be reflected in the NIF.
- Most of the real-terms increase in spending on primary and secondary school education across Scotland since 2013/14 can be attributed to the Attainment Scotland Fund. The Scottish Government set this up in 2015/16 to close the poverty-related attainment gap. When this is excluded, real-terms spending by councils increased by 0.7 per cent during the period, to just over £4.1 billion. When it is included, spending increased by 5.1 per cent in real terms, from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion. The Scottish Government had put over £200 million

of extra money into Covid-19 mitigation measures and education recovery by early January 2021.

3. Since publication of the report, the OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence has been published (June 2021). The OECD report's key findings were:

- Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence continues to be a bold and widely supported initiative, and its design offers the flexibility needed to improve student learning further
- Stakeholder engagement is at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence and offers the possibility, with better structure, for shared ownership and effective leadership of CfE
- Continued efforts are needed to enhance the coherence of the policy environment with Curriculum for Excellence
- The approach to the ongoing implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has lacked structure and long-term perspective

4. Although consideration of the curriculum was outwith our remit and therefore scope, there are commonalities between our report and that of the OECD. For example, both reports comment that:

- the National Improvement Framework (NIF) indicators do not fully align with the anticipated outcomes set out in national policy and Curriculum for Excellence
- there is an emphasis on measures of attainment, and this fails to recognise and promote the broader aims of Curriculum for Excellence and value wider outcomes for young people
- there is a consensual approach to educational decision making in Scotland, although the OECD is more critical of the structures as they relate to Curriculum for Excellence
- there is a need for effective engagement. The OECD report highlights the need for purposeful and impactful stakeholder engagement, particularly

among learners, and we found that engagement with young people is happening inconsistently.

5. The Scottish Government accepted the OECD recommendations in full. It also announced that the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) will be replaced with a new specialist agency for both curriculum and assessment and that Education Scotland will be reformed, and it will no longer undertake inspections.
6. The Scottish Government has appointed Professor Ken Muir to advise on the implementation of the OECD's recommendations for structural change of the SQA and Education Scotland, including delivery of the national curriculum, assessment, qualification and inspection functions. He began this work in August 2021 and it will conclude around 6 months after the start date.
7. We anticipate that the Scottish Government and its partners will continue to consider the recommendations contained in our report alongside those of the OECD.

Improving outcomes for young people through school education



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
March 2021



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Audit team

The core audit team consisted of: Tricia Meldrum, Beverley Oakman, Zoe McGuire and Martin Allan, with support from colleagues and under the direction of Antony Clark.

Links

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 Web link



Exhibit data

When viewing this report online, you can access background data by clicking on the graph icon. The data file will open in a new window.

Key messages

- 1** School education is not just about exam results. It also aims to improve children's and young people's health and wellbeing and support wider outcomes such as vocational qualifications. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected children and young people in many ways, including their learning, wellbeing and economic circumstances. Pupils living in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected by school closures.
- 2** Those involved in planning, delivering and supporting school education were working well together prior to the pandemic. This strong foundation helped them to collaborate to deliver a rapid response to Covid-19 in exceptionally challenging circumstances. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of school education and other sectors working together to tackle issues which affect young people's life chances and outcomes, such as child poverty and health and wellbeing.
- 3** Both national education policy and the curriculum reflect the importance for pupils of different pathways and opportunities, and outcomes beyond exam results. There has been an increase in the types of opportunities, awards and qualifications available to children and young people and an increase in the number awarded. However, better data is needed to understand if other outcomes, like wellbeing and confidence, are improving.
- 4** There is wide variation in education performance across councils, with evidence of worsening performance on some indicators in some councils. At the national level, exam performance and other attainment measures have improved. But the rate of improvement up until 2018–19 has been inconsistent across different measures.

Measuring progress has been hampered by the cancellation of exams and other data gaps caused by Covid-19. This could create risks around accountability.

- 5** The poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19. Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government's aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. The government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities must be at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-term recovery and improving education.
 - 6** Council spending on primary and secondary school education across Scotland increased by 5.1 per cent in real terms between 2013/14 and 2018/19, from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion. Most of the real-terms increase in spend can be attributed to the Attainment Scotland Fund, which the Scottish Government set up in 2015/16 to close the poverty-related attainment gap. When this is excluded, real-terms spending increased by 0.7 per cent during the period, to just over £4.1 billion. The Scottish Government had put over £200 million of extra money into Covid-19 mitigation measures and education recovery by early January 2021.
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Recommendations

The Scottish Government, councils and Education Scotland should work together to take forward the recommendations, where appropriate, within the context of a collaborative system and with lead responsibility as set out below.

The Scottish Government should:

- continue to lead the development of priorities for education recovery and improvement, building on the actions set out in the National Improvement Framework (NIF) for 2021, the Equity Audit and the forthcoming OECD review, being clear about anticipated outcomes and milestones
- work with stakeholders to develop and publish consistent and robust national data that reflects the ambitions of the national curriculum, national policy priorities such as health and wellbeing and confidence, and key priorities for Covid-19 recovery and improvement
- update the NIF to reflect data on these agreed outcomes and consider how to ensure that there is greater prominence on these broader outcome measures in public reporting and messaging, for example by inclusion in the NIF key indicators
- work with stakeholders to agree an approach to dealing with the challenges created by data disruption in 2020 and 2021 which will affect monitoring of progress in achieving policy ambitions relating to outcomes and the attainment gap
- ensure that future methods for targeting support to address inequalities reflect broader demographic issues, which are not well reflected in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), and updated data on the economic impact of Covid-19 on communities.

Education Scotland should work with schools, councils and RICs to:

- understand the factors that cause variation in performance across schools and councils
- achieve greater consistency in applying the NIF drivers through a targeted response that reflects local priorities for improvement, with a focus on reducing inequalities
- ensure the successful innovation and learning from the Covid-19 response, such as the opportunities from using digital learning, informs future planning for improved outcomes for children and young people.

Councils should:

- work with schools, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, other policy teams and partners, for example in the third sector, to reduce variability in outcomes by more consistent application of the drivers of improvement set out in the NIF, by:
 - using data to understand trends in outcome measures over time and across different demographic groups

- using evidence-based quality-improvement approaches
- sharing learning and applying good practice across schools and councils
- helping schools to build up their data analytical, evaluation and quality-improvement skills so they can make evidence-based decisions
- monitor the short- and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 (including the impact of remote learning) on local children's and young people's learning and wellbeing and take action when required to mitigate the effects and improve outcomes
- more effectively and consistently involve young people and parents in planning to improve outcomes and to inform the local response to Covid-19
- ensure third-sector organisations working with or representing children and young people are effectively involved in local planning to improve longer-term outcomes, and to deliver the local education response to Covid-19.

The Scottish Government, Education Scotland and councils should:

- continue to ensure a coordinated policy response within and across government (for example with health and children and families services) when planning to improve longer-term outcomes for children and young people and delivering the education recovery response to the equality impacts of Covid-19
- use the Equity Audit and other evidence to monitor the short- and longer-term impact of Covid-19 on children's and young people's learning and wellbeing, and to inform the development of local and national priorities and targeting of mitigating actions
- further promote the importance of the different pathways, qualifications and awards available to young people with parents, carers, politicians, and the media, to support wider public understanding of the importance of broader outcomes.

About this audit

1. In 2019, Audit Scotland carried out audit work to look at how effectively the Scottish Government, councils and their partners were improving outcomes for young people through school education. This work was paused in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was restarted in October 2020 to look at the impact of Covid-19 on school education and the response taken by the Scottish Government, councils and their partners. This report draws together the key findings from these two pieces of work. We recognise that this is a fast-changing situation and this report only covers actions taken by the Scottish Government, councils and their partners up until early January 2021. We also recognise that the global Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on education systems, children and young people and families across the world. The objectives of the initial and follow-up work are set out in the audit scopes on our [website](#)  and methodologies are outlined in [Appendix 1. Methodology \(page 52\)](#). This audit considered mainstream primary and secondary school education and is part of a body of audit work in this area ([Exhibit 1, page 7](#)).

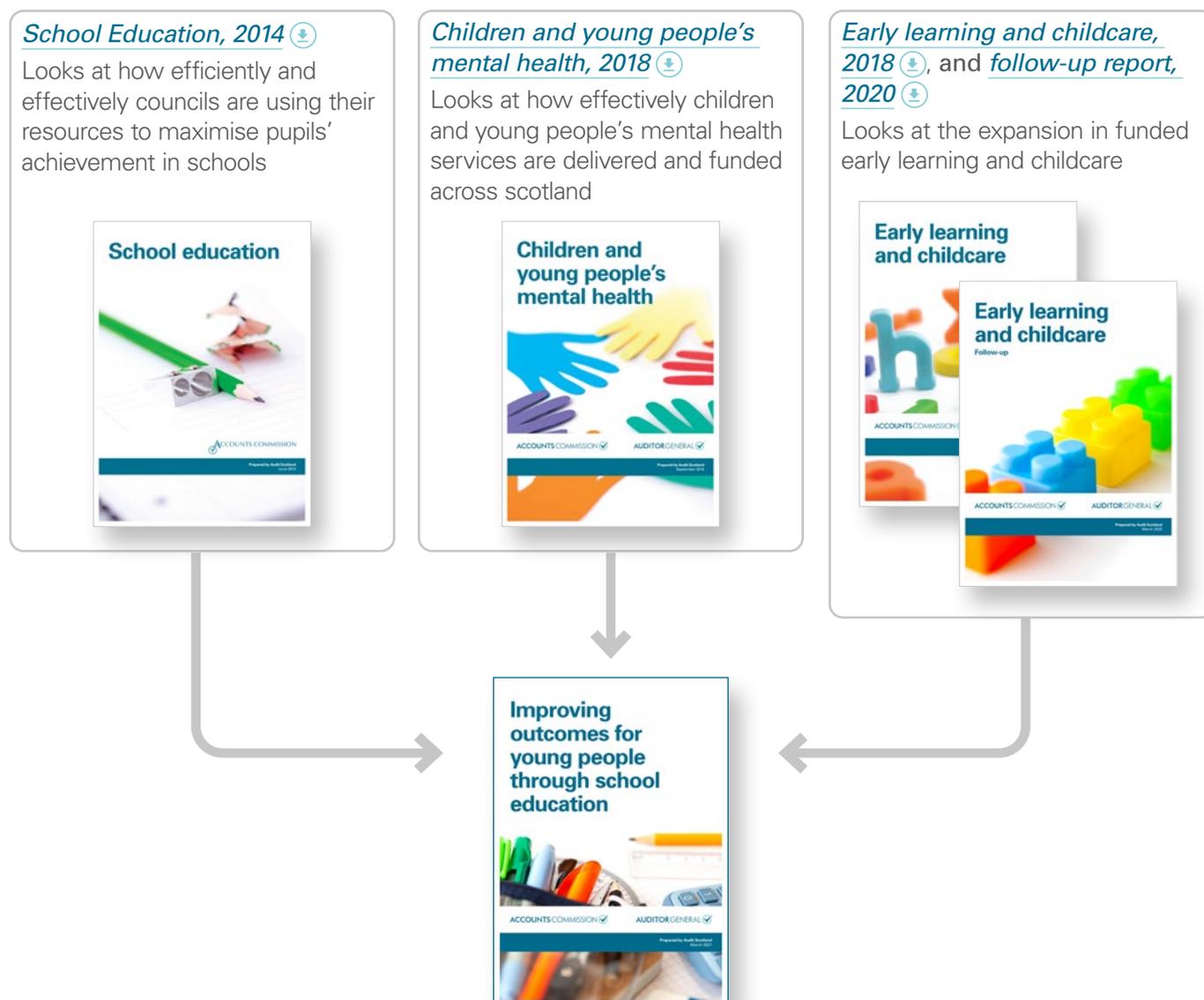
2. We would like to thank members of the audit advisory group listed in [Appendix 2. Advisory group \(page 55\)](#), and also members of the Inform 100 youth panel who worked with us throughout the audit.

Exhibit 1

Related audit work on outcomes for children and young people

This report is part of a wider programme of audit work.

Previous reports



Potential areas for future audit work

Progress towards achieving targets to reduce child poverty, including mitigating the impact of Covid-19

The effectiveness of actions to improve outcomes for young people with additional support needs and to mitigate the impact of Covid-19

Action taken in response to the findings of the Independent Care Review to improve outcomes for care-experienced children and young people

The cost and impact of the expansion in funded early learning and childcare

Further work on school education, following up on the themes and recommendations in this report

Background

3. School education is fundamental to ensuring positive long-term outcomes for young people and it impacts on Scotland's economy and society. It performs a key role in contributing to the 11 long-term outcomes set out in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework (NPF).¹ The Scottish Government is responsible for developing national policy and strategic direction. Its vision for education in Scotland is:

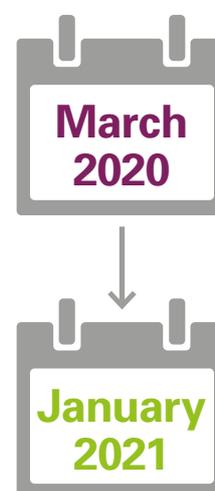
- excellence through raising attainment: ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to shape their future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors
- achieving equity: ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.²

4. The Scottish Government, in its strategic response to Covid-19, has designated keeping schools open a key priority.³ In March 2020, the Scottish Government took the decision to close all schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Councils provided hubs for the children of keyworkers and vulnerable children, but most learning was carried out remotely. Schools reopened after the summer holidays in August 2020 and closed again after the Christmas holidays (see the [school education Covid-19 timeline](#)  on our website).

5. Scotland's 32 councils are responsible for local education policy, providing school education for every school-age child and improving outcomes.⁴ They also have a statutory duty to reduce inequalities in outcomes for those pupils from a disadvantaged background.⁵ Children normally spend seven years in primary school (P1–P7) and at least four years in secondary school (S1–S4). Pupils can then leave school at 16 or stay on for one or two more years (S5 and S6). In September 2020, there were 2,362 council-run primary and secondary schools teaching 694,911 pupils.⁶ In 2018/19, councils spent a total of around £4.3 billion providing primary and secondary school education, 28 per cent of their total revenue spending.⁷

6. Education Scotland is the executive agency of the Scottish Government tasked with supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education. It carries out inspections and reviews of schools, colleges, councils and their partners, and works with teachers and other educators, schools, councils and Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) to help them improve. Since Covid-19 emerged, Education Scotland has paused inspections and focused more on providing national and local support for schools, teachers, pupils and parents, for example with moving to remote learning.

7. In their Joint Agreement published in 2018, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) set out that *'improving the education and life chances of our children and young people is the defining mission of our Scottish education system. Our shared ambition is to close the unacceptable gap in attainment between our least and most disadvantaged children and to raise attainment for all'*. The Scottish Government has committed over £800 million to raise attainment and improve outcomes over the lifetime of this Parliament (2016 to 2021) through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC). A further £128 million has been allocated for 2021/22.⁸ This is part of an ongoing programme of education reform.



[School education Covid-19 timeline](#) 

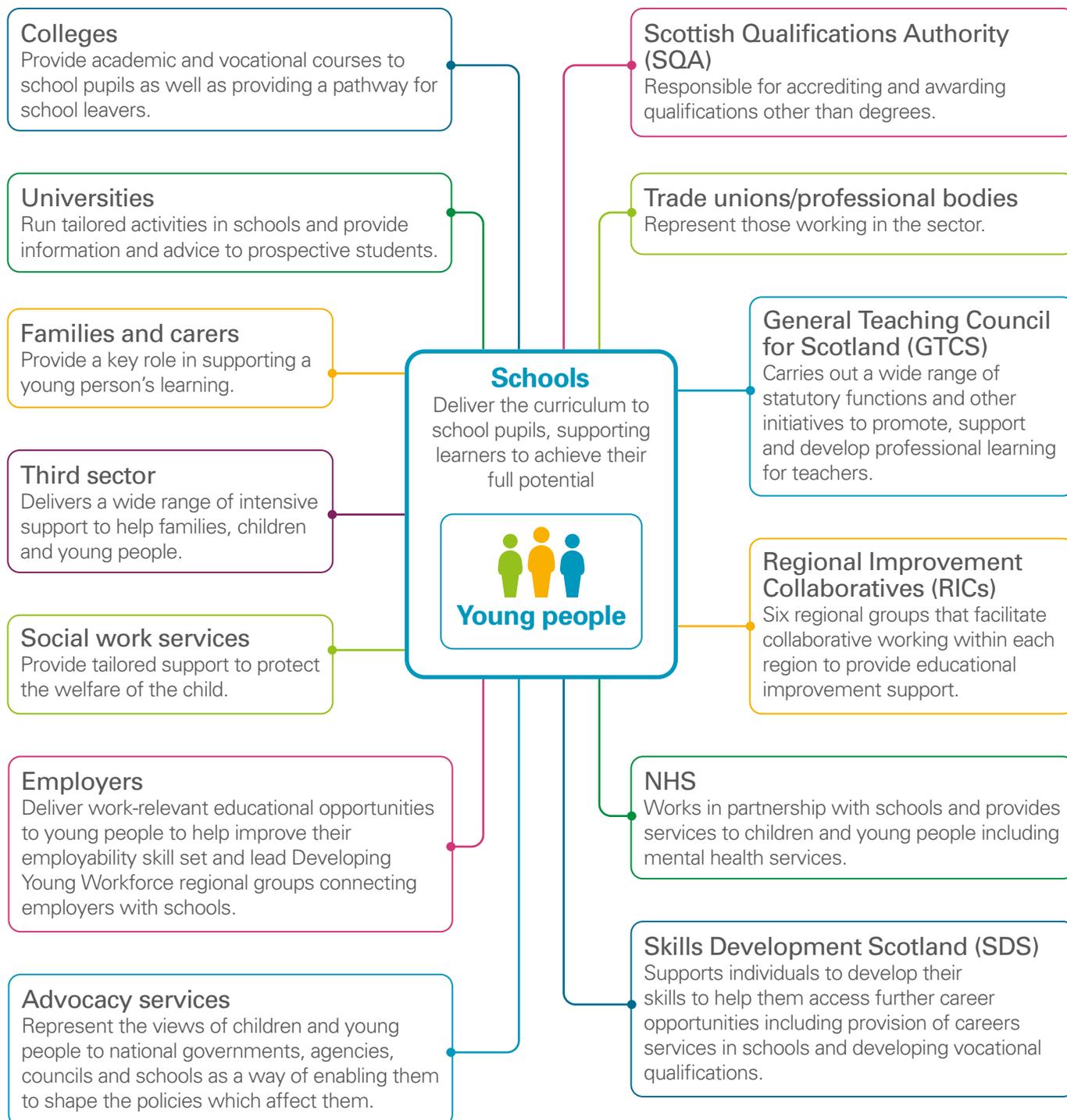
8. Other stakeholders play an important role in improving outcomes for young people through school education, working in partnership with the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, councils and schools ([Exhibit 2, page 10](#)).

9. Since lockdown started in March 2020, those working in education and their partners (the education sector) have worked hard in exceptional circumstances to help meet the needs of children and young people and their families. Leaders, teachers and others have had to make difficult decisions very quickly and with no previous experience to draw on. This has been, and continues to be, a very challenging period for children and young people, their families and people working in education. We recognise those challenges and the scale of the work and effort that everyone has put in. We also recognise that it is too early to draw conclusions on the impact of some of the decisions taken.

Exhibit 2

Role of other stakeholders in improving outcomes from school education

Many stakeholders work with schools to improve outcomes for young people through their school education.



Outcomes

- 1** School education in Scotland is not just about exam results. It also aims to improve children's and young people's health and wellbeing and support wider outcomes such as life skills, apprenticeships and employment. The National Improvement Framework (NIF), which sets out the key priorities for education, is embedded across the education system and is recognised as central to driving improvement.
- 2** National policy and the national curriculum reflect the importance of health and wellbeing, different pathways and opportunities, and other broader outcomes. There has been an increase in the types of opportunities, awards and qualifications available to children and young people and an increase in the number awarded.
- 3** There is wide variation in performance across councils, including examples of worsening performance in some councils on some indicators. Up to 2018/19, most attainment measures, including performance in exams, had been improving at a national level, but the rate of improvement has been inconsistent across the different measures. The rate of improvement was much greater in the 2020 qualifications awarded to learners, based on teacher judgements rather than examinations.
- 4** Many young people have reported that their mental health has been affected by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. There has been a welcome focus on supporting and monitoring wellbeing during the pandemic and this needs to continue. Prior to the pandemic, there was a lot of focus on improving and tracking

attainment through the NIF key measures and less consistent and robust national data on some wider outcomes, such as health and wellbeing.

- 5** Measurement of progress in achieving outcomes and the national priorities will be hampered by temporary gaps in data collection and disruption to data due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as that caused by the changes in assessing qualifications in 2020 and 2021 as a result of the cancellation of exams. This creates risks relating to accountability.
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School education contributes to a whole range of outcomes for children and young people

10. Improving outcomes from school education is a key tenet of Scottish Government policy, reflecting the importance of education to achieving wider social and economic outcomes for individuals, communities and the nation.

11. There is consensus across those involved in education in central and local government in Scotland and their partners that outcomes through school education are about more than examination results and include confidence, wellbeing, general life skills and work skills. There is also agreement that outcomes should be centred around the individual young person.

12. The National Improvement Framework (NIF) is the key plan that sets out the priorities for education. It is recognised and embedded across the education system as central to driving improvement. The NIF sets out four priorities:

- improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
- closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people
- improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
- improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people.⁹

13. The Scottish Government first published the NIF in 2016 and it has been updated annually since then. Schools, councils and the Scottish Government use it as the primary tool for driving improvement. It is used to support the development of local policies and plans to improve outcomes, and it plays a part in Education Scotland's approach to supporting RICs, councils and schools to improve.

14. School education is delivered in the context of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Scotland's national curriculum. This aims to put the young person at the centre of learning and help them gain the knowledge, skills and attributes for life in the 21st century by providing them with four capacities:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors.¹⁰

15. The updated NIF, published in December 2020, revised the definition of excellence through raising attainment to better align with these four capacities and reflect broader outcomes.¹¹ In February 2020, the Scottish Government announced a review of CfE would be undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and findings are due to be reported in June 2021.

16. Young people themselves agree that outcomes are broader than exam performance. A survey of 1,731 secondary school pupils across Scotland found that the top three most important things they wanted to get out of their time at

school were: qualifications to get into college/university (51 per cent), skills to help get a job (47 per cent) and life skills (40 per cent).¹² Self-confidence was also rated as important, by 34 per cent increasing to 40 per cent among females. Our focus groups with primary and secondary pupils found that outcomes such as 'learning wider life skills', 'being happy and confident' and 'getting a good job', were also important.

17. Discussions with parent organisations and focus groups found that parents and carers also want pupils to achieve what they need at school to excel in life. This includes both academic achievement and being confident and happy individuals.

Commentary on education performance mainly focuses on attainment

18. Central and local government share an understanding of the policy approach that is focused on achieving broader outcomes with the young person at the centre of the system. However, many commentators and other interested parties tend to place greater emphasis on traditional outcome measures. Media messaging around exam performance is seen as unhelpful and dispiriting by pupils, teachers and councils as this represents only part of the picture. Focusing on exam performance is important but needs to be balanced by an understanding of wider outcomes and recognition of their value. An emphasis on measures of attainment in exams, while important, fails to recognise and promote the broader aims of CfE and value the wider achievements of young people.

The Scottish Government reports on a wide range of outcomes although the key measures focus more on attainment

19. The NIF brings together a range of information and data on the education system. It includes 11 key measures, seven of which relate to national qualifications and achievement of CfE levels in literacy and numeracy. These measures were agreed following external consultation and included in the NIF in 2018.¹³

20. There is less consistent and robust national data in the NIF on wider outcomes, such as wellbeing, that have been identified as key priorities. This makes it difficult to assess whether the Scottish Government is achieving the four key NIF priorities. The NIF includes some survey data and the Scottish Government is planning to introduce a new health and wellbeing census to provide better information. This has been planned since the NIF 2019 but was delayed because of the impact of Covid-19.¹⁴ The NIF also includes data on wider outcomes such as attainment of vocational qualifications. However, this is less comprehensive than the more traditional attainment measures and has less prominence as they are not key measures.

21. This imbalance towards more traditional attainment in the NIF key measures, with less prominence on measures of wider outcomes, may not help the understanding of wider outcomes highlighted earlier ([paragraph 18](#)).

22. The Scottish Government also publishes a wide range of data and commentary on progress against the actions set out for the key drivers to support improved outcomes detailed in the NIF. We discuss these drivers in [Working together to improve outcomes \(page 34\)](#). The NIF states that progress against these drivers is expected to help lead to improved outcomes.¹⁵

Secondary school pupils' top-rated outcomes from education include qualifications, skills for work, life skills and self-confidence

Improvement in attainment in relation to exam performance and CfE was inconsistent before the pandemic, with large variation across councils

23. Improving attainment for all is central to the Scottish Government's education policy and this vision is shared by councils and other partners. Performance in exams and against CfE levels are important in improving attainment. However, there has been inconsistent improvement across a range of these indicators in recent years, and the poverty-related attainment gap is still wide. We discuss the gap further in [Inequalities \(page 25\)](#).

At a national level there has been improvement in performance across most indicators of exam performance in the senior phase (S4 to S6) and across CfE levels but there is wide variation across councils

24. Up to 2018/19, most measures of performance in exams and against CfE levels had been improving at a national level, but the rate of improvement has been inconsistent across indicators since 2013/14. We looked at a range of indicators reported nationally on the numbers of S4 to S6 pupils who leave school with awards for Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 4 to 7 ([Exhibit A](#)  on our website).

25. Based on these indicators, the largest improvements are in the proportion of school leavers achieving three or more awards at level six (Higher) which increased from 45.3 per cent in 2013/14 to 50.9 per cent in 2018/19, and the proportion achieving five or more awards at level 5 (National 5) which increased from 58.8 per cent to 64.3 per cent over the same period. The rate of improvement is less than four percentage points against most of the indicators we looked at.¹⁶ A–C pass rates for awards at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher increased in 2019/20, however these were based on teacher judgement and cannot be compared with previous years.¹⁷ We discuss this further in [paragraphs 30–31](#). The Scottish Government's national aim is to improve outcomes for all, but it has not set out by how much or by when.

More young people are also achieving other types of awards, in line with the aims of the national curriculum

26. The NIF states that the four capacities of CfE ([paragraph 14](#)) 'were designed to produce a more rounded education with broader achievements being recognised alongside academic attainment'. This highlights the importance of different pathways and opportunities being available to children and young people to best meet their needs. The percentage of school leavers achieving vocational qualifications has increased over this period, particularly at SCQF level 5 (equivalent to National 5). This has increased from 7.3 per cent of pupils leaving school with one or more passes at this level in 2013/14 to 17.1 per cent in 2018/19.¹⁸ In 2020, 26,970 skills-based awards at level 5 were also awarded including skills for work, personal development awards, national certificates, and national progression awards, up from 16,314 in 2014.¹⁹ We discuss these different pathways and opportunities further in [paragraphs 45–49](#).

27. In 2019, we asked councils about the types of wider achievement awards offered in their schools. Of the 28 councils who responded, the number and type of awards varied from council to council, but almost all offer the Duke of Edinburgh's award. This award is not reflected in the Scottish Qualification Authority's (SQA) awards data as it is not accredited. More than 60 per cent of councils who responded also offer the John Muir Award, Saltire Award and Youth Scotland Awards.²⁰ In addition to the most popular awards, a wide variety of others are offered.²¹ These contribute to the wider experiences of young people.

There is large variation in trends in outcomes across councils

28. We have focused on four outcome indicators for more detailed analysis of the senior phase ([Exhibit 3, page 17](#)). These indicators are relevant for most young people and are generally indicative of trends in exam performance and CfE levels in councils across Scotland. Nine councils with the highest proportions of pupils living in the most deprived areas, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) are classified as attainment challenge councils and receive additional funding from the Scottish Government through the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) which supports the Scottish Attainment Challenge.²² All councils also receive some additional ASF funding for individual schools or pupils.

29. The level of improvement across councils varies significantly, with performance declining against some indicators in some councils. Performance on all four indicators improved in 13 of the 32 councils and on three out of the four indicators in a further 12. For the indicator measuring the percentage of school leavers achieving one or more awards at level 5 or above, performance declined in 13 councils, four of which were attainment challenge councils. Falkirk was the most improved council in two of the four indicators. A range of factors can contribute to a council's performance and rate of improvement, and the NIF sets out key drivers for improvement. We discuss these further in [Working together to improve outcomes \(page 34\)](#). Councils face different pressures and challenges, for example due to their geography, levels of deprivation, staffing levels, funding levels and local priorities. These factors need to be considered when comparing performance across councils.

Performance in senior phase awards improved in 2020, based on teacher judgement, but cannot be compared with outcomes before Covid-19

30. Measurement of progress in achieving outcomes and the national priorities will be hampered by temporary gaps in data collection and disruption to data due to Covid-19. When the exams were cancelled in 2020 because of the pandemic, the Deputy First Minister asked the SQA to develop an alternative certification model. This certification model was based on teacher judgement. The results were initially moderated by the SQA using a statistical algorithm that standardised teacher estimates based on the centre's recent attainment. However, the Scottish Government overturned that approach due to concerns about unfairness. Final results were based on teacher judgements although a small number of students who had results moderated upwards were allowed to keep a higher grade. The results in 2021 will also be based on teacher judgement and a quality assurance process, but no statistically based moderation process will be applied.²³

31. The SQA published revised attainment rate statistics on 31 August 2020. Attainment rates for graded national qualifications in 2020 were much higher than in previous years. Compared with 2019:

- the National 5 attainment rate (A–C) increased by 10.8 percentage points from 78.2 per cent to 89.0 per cent
- the Higher attainment rate (A–C) increased by 14.5 percentage points from 74.8 per cent to 89.3 per cent
- the Advanced Higher attainment rate (A–C) increased by 13.7 percentage points from 79.4 per cent to 93.1 per cent.



The level of improvement across councils varies significantly

Exhibit 3

National and local performance against a range of indicators in latest year available and change over time

All indicators show improvement at a national level, although there are large variations in local performance.

Council	Percentage of school leavers achieving 1 award or more at SCQF level 5 or better		Percentage of school leavers achieving 5 awards or more at SCQF level 5 or better	
	2018/19	% change since 2013/14	2018/19	% change since 2013/14
Aberdeen City	83.5	3.5	57.9	5.9
Aberdeenshire	86.8	4.0	64.8	7.2
Angus	82.5	-1.3	61.7	0.9
Argyll and Bute	88.1	2.6	67.5	8.3
Dumfries and Galloway	86.3	1.1	62.4	4.8
East Dunbartonshire	96.2	1.8	85.8	7.2
East Lothian	82.9	-0.8	63.3	4.0
East Renfrewshire	96.3	0.4	88.6	6.1
Edinburgh City	83.7	-0.5	64.1	3.3
Falkirk	86.5	2.4	67.9	10.5
Fife	81.5	-0.5	60.0	3.5
Highland	85.1	-0.3	62.5	3.1
Midlothian	82.5	2.8	58.4	3.5
Moray	85.3	-3.7	61.6	0.7
Orkney Islands	91.7	2.2	66.8	-3.7
Perth and Kinross	85.4	-0.7	64.1	1.9
Scottish Borders	84.9	1.8	63.9	0.7
Shetland Islands	Not available		72.9	8.5
South Ayrshire	88.0	0.4	70.6	9.4
South Lanarkshire	84.3	2.6	64.9	8.5
Stirling	86.0	-1.6	72.3	9.1
West Lothian	86.1	0.9	72.1	8.2
Western Isles	88.9	-2.5	65.9	0.0

Cont.

Council	Percentage of school leavers achieving 1 award or more at SCQF level 5 or better		Percentage of school leavers achieving 5 awards or more at SCQF level 5 or better	
	2018/19	% change since 2013/14	2018/19	% change since 2013/14
Attainment challenge councils:				
Clackmannanshire	78.8	 -1.2	55.8	 5.4
Dundee City	78.8	 -1.3	55.6	 5.4
East Ayrshire	80.0	 -2.9	62.0	 3.2
Glasgow City	83.2	 2.7	57.8	 8.1
Inverclyde	89.5	 2.5	67.1	 8.5
North Ayrshire	83.3	 3.2	60.7	 7.6
North Lanarkshire	84.4	 -0.9	62.4	 5.7
Renfrewshire	88.2	 0.6	66.3	 2.8
West Dunbartonshire	85.6	 1.4	58.2	 1.6
Scotland	85.1	 0.7	64.3	 5.5

Council	Percentage of 16–19 year olds participating in education, employment or training		Percentage of school leavers achieving literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 4	
	2019/20	% change since 2015/16	2018/19	% change since 2015/16
Aberdeen City	89.9	1.0	85.9	-2.0
Aberdeenshire	92.3	-0.9	90.7	-2.0
Angus	91.4	-0.2	89.0	-1.6
Argyll and Bute	94.1	-0.1	89.3	1.4
Dumfries and Galloway	91.9	1.3	89.3	1.9
East Dunbartonshire	96.1	0.5	97.3	1.7
East Lothian	94.5	3.9	88.9	0.8
East Renfrewshire	96.7	0.3	95.8	0.3
Edinburgh City	92.4	2.5	89.1	1.1
Falkirk	91.9	2.1	93.8	7.7
Fife	91.7	3.4	90.1	2.0
Highland	93.6	0.2	87.8	1.3
Midlothian	93.4	4.7	89.5	1.7
Moray	93.5	2.5	84.8	-2.1
Orkney Islands	94.7	0.6	89.1	-3.9
Perth and Kinross	94.8	2.0	89.4	4.9
Scottish Borders	94.5	3.1	89.9	1.0
Shetland Islands	96.8	-0.6	91.7	-2.1
South Ayrshire	91.4	0.5	91.4	-0.2
South Lanarkshire	92.7	2.3	88.2	1.0
Stirling	94.4	2.3	93.2	0.7
West Lothian	92.4	2.7	90.1	1.0
Western Isles	95.5	-0.3	88.1	-0.6

Cont.

Council	Percentage of 16–19 year olds participating in education, employment or training		Percentage of school leavers achieving literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 4	
	2019/20	% change since 2015/16	2018/19	% change since 2015/16
Attainment challenge councils:				
Clackmannanshire	89.3	1.1	83.9	1.1
Dundee City	90.0	2.3	85.8	-0.2
East Ayrshire	90.0	0.7	89.2	3.8
Glasgow City	89.5	2.7	85.8	2.7
Inverclyde	92.9	1.7	92.4	1.2
North Ayrshire	90.6	0.7	88.2	0.7
North Lanarkshire	90.7	1.4	87.1	0.6
Renfrewshire	92.4	1.7	92.1	1.0
West Dunbartonshire	90.2	1.8	88.9	4.5
Scotland	92.1	1.7	89.3	1.2

Notes: The percentage of school leavers achieving one or more award at level 5 is not available for Shetland due to small numbers. In senior phase there were changes to how achievement of literacy and numeracy was recognised which is why 2015/16 is the baseline. The participation measure was first published in 2015/16 and 2019/20 data was published in August 2020.

Sources: 1 award or more at level 5 or better – Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, Scottish Government; School leavers with 5 or more awards at level 5 and level 4 literacy and numeracy – Insight Database, Scottish Government (We have used two separate sources for qualifications data due to data availability – these are not directly comparable. See methodology section for further details); Annual Participation measure – Skills Development Scotland.



32. The increase in pass rates means more young people were eligible for places at university. The Scottish Government gave a commitment that there would be 'provision for enough places in universities and colleges to ensure that no one is crowded out of a place they would otherwise have been awarded' and announced plans to fund additional student places.²⁴ The Rapid Review of National Qualifications also noted it had been reported that entrance grades for some courses had been inflated for 2021 as a consequence of more young people applying for courses.²⁵

Data collection on national performance for primary and early secondary pupils was cancelled in 2020 due to the pandemic. This will affect performance tracking over time.

33. In our previous school education report in 2014, we reported that performance measurement of primary school pupils was limited to the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN). The SSLN was discontinued in 2017 and the Scottish Government developed new measures. These new measures of pupil performance at primary and early secondary school, based on teacher judgement, have been available since 2016/17. These show some improvements between 2016/17 and 2018/19, with variation across councils.²⁶ However, data was not collected in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning there is no national data on trends in academic performance for these pupils.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on children and young people that could affect them across a range of outcomes

34. The public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that schools in Scotland were closed from 23 March 2020 until after the school holidays in August. This had an impact on children's and young people's learning, experiences and wellbeing, and could affect their outcomes in the longer term. The Children's Commissioner has also highlighted concerns about the impact on children's and young people's human rights.²⁷ After schools reopened, pupils continued to be affected by public health measures. Some were required to self-isolate and spend time away from school because they or a close contact had tested positive for Covid-19. Schools closed again in January 2021 for a period of remote teaching and learning. We discuss the support that schools, councils, Scottish Government and their partners provided to children and young people and their families in [Working together to improve outcomes \(page 34\)](#).

35. This disruption to learning is likely to have an impact on the range of outcomes that young people should achieve through school education. Negative impacts identified by the Scottish Government include loss of learning and loss of school experiences such as interacting with their peers.²⁸ The pandemic has also impacted on the opportunities for young people to participate in some activities that contribute to those broader life skills and wider outcomes, such as work placements and Duke of Edinburgh's Awards.

36. The cancellation of senior phase examinations in 2020 meant a period of significant challenge and uncertainty for young people. They reported confusion and anxiety over conflicting messages about how their grades would be calculated.²⁹ Some young people who initially achieved university places through clearing reported that they could not go back to their original course choices when grades were improved using teacher judgement.³⁰

37. This audit does not look specifically at outcomes for children and young people who need additional support for learning (ASL) or care-experienced children and young people. However, available research shows that Covid-19 has had additional detrimental impacts on these children and young people. For example, some parents and carers of children who need ASL have found it particularly challenging to support their learning at home, and care-experienced children and young people are more likely to face challenges with distance learning.³¹ A survey of over 1,000 children who were care experienced or on the edges of the care system by the mentoring charity MCR pathways found that 67 per cent reported feeling low, more anxious and stressed and 68 per cent did no schoolwork during the initial lockdown.³²

38. Covid-19 has affected children and young people in wider ways. Increased isolation, the impact of the economic downturn on their family/carer's financial situation, having family or friends experiencing illness or bereavement, increased stress in the home or domestic situation and increased risk of other adverse childhood experiences have all taken a toll.

Covid-19 has had a detrimental effect on children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing

39. Many young people have reported that their mental health and wellbeing has been affected by the impacts of the pandemic. A series of surveys carried out by the Children's Parliament found that the proportion of children who were able to cope and bounce back from adversity had declined over time. The proportion of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'Even if I am having

a difficult time, I feel I will be okay' fell from 72 per cent in April, to 70 per cent in May and 67 per cent in June.³³ The most recent survey showed no change over time for 12–14-year-old boys in those who agreed with the statement, but a fall from 62 per cent to 54 per cent in girls of the same age.³⁴

40. Some children and young people had a better experience. Findings from the Scottish Government's equity audit show that some children found it easier to learn remotely, especially if they had a good digital set-up and good parental engagement.³⁵

Schools, councils and the Scottish Government have increased their focus on improving children's and young people's health and wellbeing following the impact of Covid-19

41. The Audit Scotland review of children's and young people's mental health found that support for mental health and wellbeing within schools varies.³⁶ The NIF recognises the importance of health and wellbeing to pupils' ability to learn. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools and councils were already putting a lot of work into improving children's and young people's health and wellbeing. We found many examples of how councils and schools are doing this, both as part of their core activity and through specific projects and posts funded by the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The ASF includes Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) that has gone directly to schools and a number of PEF projects in schools aim to improve children's and young people's health and wellbeing. We discuss the ASF further in the next chapter.

42. Those working in education are focusing on children's and young people's wellbeing as a key priority as the sector continues to deal with and recover from the impact of Covid-19. For example, the RICs have prioritised health and wellbeing in their recovery plans. The Scottish Government acknowledges that the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as that of parents and carers, has been negatively affected by the pandemic.³⁷

43. The *Coronavirus (Covid-19): mental health – transition and recovery plan*, part of which is designed to specifically support children, young people and their carers, sets out a series of actions. These include ensuring all schools have access to a counselling service by the end of October 2020, providing a framework to support a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing in the context of Covid-19, and developing a national policy to support children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing for all sectors of the children and families workforce by Autumn 2021.³⁸ Funding of £15 million has been distributed amongst all councils to support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their parents and carers.³⁹

44. There has been a focus on supporting other aspects of wellbeing during the pandemic. For example, through the provision of free school meals for eligible children during lockdown, and in the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays.

There are more opportunities for young people to achieve wider outcomes, but there are challenges and Covid-19 has added to these

45. A number of other opportunities are available to pupils at schools through partnerships with colleges and employers, reflecting the ambitions in CfE. These include pupils achieving Foundation Apprenticeships and pupils studying



The proportion of children who were able to cope and bounce back from adversity declined over time, notably among 12–14-year-old girls

for qualifications through courses at colleges. These alternative pathways are becoming more common for young people.

46. Foundation Apprenticeships are a work-based learning opportunity for secondary school pupils in the senior phase, usually lasting for two years. Students typically start their Foundation Apprenticeship in S5, working out of school in college or with a local employer. They can do this while studying for other qualifications at school.

47. The first cohort of Foundation Apprenticeships started in 2016. The number of people starting a Foundation Apprenticeship has increased almost tenfold, from 346 in the 2016 cohort to 3,445 in 2019.⁴⁰ However, drop-out rates are high.⁴¹

48. The Scottish Government has said that it wants to achieve the change in the system necessary to embed Foundation Apprenticeships in the senior phase curriculum. Education Scotland will be reviewing the Foundation Apprenticeships programme with the aim of improving their delivery.⁴²

49. College as an alternative pathway for young people is becoming more common. The number of school pupils under 16 years of age attending college almost doubled between 2014/15 and 2019/20 (from 18,450 in 2014/15 to 35,801 in 2019/20). Pupils aged under 16 now make up 15 per cent of the student population compared with eight per cent in 2014/15.⁴³

50. Barriers to the provision of these different pathways include aligning school and college timetables, and transport difficulties, particularly in more rural areas. Aspects of the way colleges are funded can also create challenges. In most cases, courses undertaken by school pupils at college, such as Highers, are funded through core rather than additional funding. It is for colleges to work with their partners to assess demand from school and post-school learners and decide how best to allocate places and funding. Foundation Apprenticeships undertaken by school pupils are funded as additional activity, paid as pupils hit agreed milestones. This can be problematic when the drop-out rate is high.

51. The focus by some commentators on exam qualifications being the perceived best outcome for young people, and the greater focus on academic attainment in key performance measures, can also mean that some young people do not get the same encouragement and support to pursue these alternative pathways. These issues have implications for ensuring that young people are pursuing a path that is best for them, which may not be an academic one, and for achieving the Scottish Government's skills ambitions.

52. There are risks that the economic downturn resulting from Covid-19 will affect the opportunities available to young people. Employers may not be able to offer the same apprenticeship and work placement opportunities, and colleges are facing financial pressures.⁴⁴ In addition, the economic situation is likely to reduce the number of jobs and other opportunities available to young people.^{45 46} The Scottish Government is aiming to mitigate this through the introduction of the Young Person's Guarantee in September 2020. This guarantees that by September 2022 everyone in Scotland between the ages of 16 and 24 will have the opportunity, based on their own personal circumstances and ambitions, to go to university or college, or participate in an apprenticeship programme, training, work experience or a formal volunteering programme.⁴⁷

The number of school pupils under 16 years of age attending college almost doubled between 2014/15 and 2019/20

The Scottish Government, councils and their partners need to build on the work already undertaken to agree clear priorities for education recovery and improved outcomes after Covid-19

53. As we have previously highlighted, it is always important that national and local policy sets out what outcomes it intends to achieve for people, and that data and evidence are available to measure progress and take further action if needed.⁴⁸ It is now more important than ever that schools, councils and the Scottish Government are clear about:

- the priorities for education recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and how to improve outcomes beyond what was being achieved before
- what that means in terms of the anticipated outcomes for children and young people
- how these outcomes will be measured, reported and acted on.

54. They need to build on the actions set out in the NIF 2021, the policy alignment that is already in place across the education sector, the joint working, and the learning from how education has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.

55. The impact of Covid-19 has increased the focus on wider outcomes, particularly health and wellbeing. As the country recovers from the impact of Covid-19 and agrees its priorities for improvement there are opportunities for the Scottish Government and local government to do more to ensure that wider outcomes receive the same attention and prominence as exam performance as they work to address the negative impacts on children and young people.

Inequalities

- 1** Nationally the poverty-related attainment gap between pupils living in the most and least deprived areas has narrowed across most NIF outcome indicators, but it remains wide. The gap is wider at higher levels of qualifications. The reduction in the poverty-related attainment gap is because the performance of pupils in the most deprived areas has improved more than the performance of those from the least deprived areas. Reducing the poverty-related attainment gap is a complex challenge and will take time but improvement needs to happen more quickly.
- 2** Measurement of progress to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap will be affected by temporary disruption to data, for example caused by changes to the assessment process as a result of exam cancellations.
- 3** The effects of Covid-19, including the economic impacts and the public health measures which have been put in place, are likely to increase levels of inequality experienced by children and young people. During the pandemic there has been variation in the learning experience of children and young people, and there is a risk that this will exacerbate the poverty-related attainment gap.
- 4** The impact of Covid-19 on outcomes for children and young people is influenced by their circumstances including their experience of poverty and deprivation. Pupils living in very challenging circumstances have been most affected by the impact of school closures. These pupils were particularly affected by access to digital resources. The Scottish Government and its partners have taken action to address the digital gap, but it has taken time to implement these measures.

- 5** The Scottish Government, councils and their partners recognise that addressing inequalities must be at the core of plans for education recovery and beyond.
 - 6** Future efforts to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap, including the targeting of funds, should take account of the impact of Covid-19 on the scale and spread of poverty, and address the limitations of the current approach to targeting based on SIMD.
-

The gap in attainment between pupils in the most and least deprived communities has reduced in recent years but remains wide

56. The Scottish Government defines the poverty-related attainment gap as the difference in attainment between pupils living in the most deprived and least deprived areas, with level of deprivation being based on SIMD quintiles. An individual's SIMD status is based on where they live, with those who live in the 20 per cent of areas with the highest deprivation recorded as being in the most deprived quintile.

57. Nationally, the poverty-related attainment gap has narrowed slightly across most indicators in recent years, mainly because the performance of those from the most deprived SIMD quintile has improved at a faster rate. For example, the gap in school leavers achieving five or more awards at level 5 narrowed by 5.4 percentage points between 2013/14 and 2018/19 ([Exhibit B](#)  on our website). Leavers from the most deprived quintile improved by 8.4 percentage points and leavers from the least deprived quintile improved by 3.0 percentage points.⁴⁹ Across all the indicators we looked at relating to the senior phase there is a gap between pupils from the least deprived and most deprived areas ([Exhibit C](#)  on our website). This gap is wider at higher levels of award:

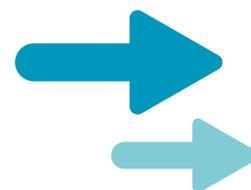
- In 2018/19, 94.0 per cent of pupils from the least deprived areas achieved five or more awards at level 4, compared to 76.1 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas – a gap of 18.0 percentage points.
- In 2018/19, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more awards at level 5 was 82.7 per cent for pupils from the least deprived areas, compared to 46.5 per cent for school leavers from the most deprived areas – a gap of 36.2 percentage points.

58. Deprivation alone does not account for all variation in council performance ([Exhibit 4, page 28](#)). For school leavers from the most deprived areas who achieved five or more awards at level 5 in 2018/19, performance across councils ranged from 26.5 per cent to 71.5 per cent. In the case of school leavers from the least deprived areas, performance ranged from 72.7 per cent to 93.6 per cent.

59. Between 2014/15 and 2018/19 the poverty-related attainment gap in the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more awards at level 5 narrowed in most councils, although it increased in ten ([Exhibit D](#)  on our website).

60. The poverty-related attainment gap, in terms of expected levels of literacy and numeracy, is also evident at primary school level and early secondary school level, and is reducing only slightly– ([Exhibit E](#)  on our website).

61. Exam awards in 2020 showed a narrowing of the attainment gap, but awards were based on teacher judgements and are not directly comparable with those of previous years.

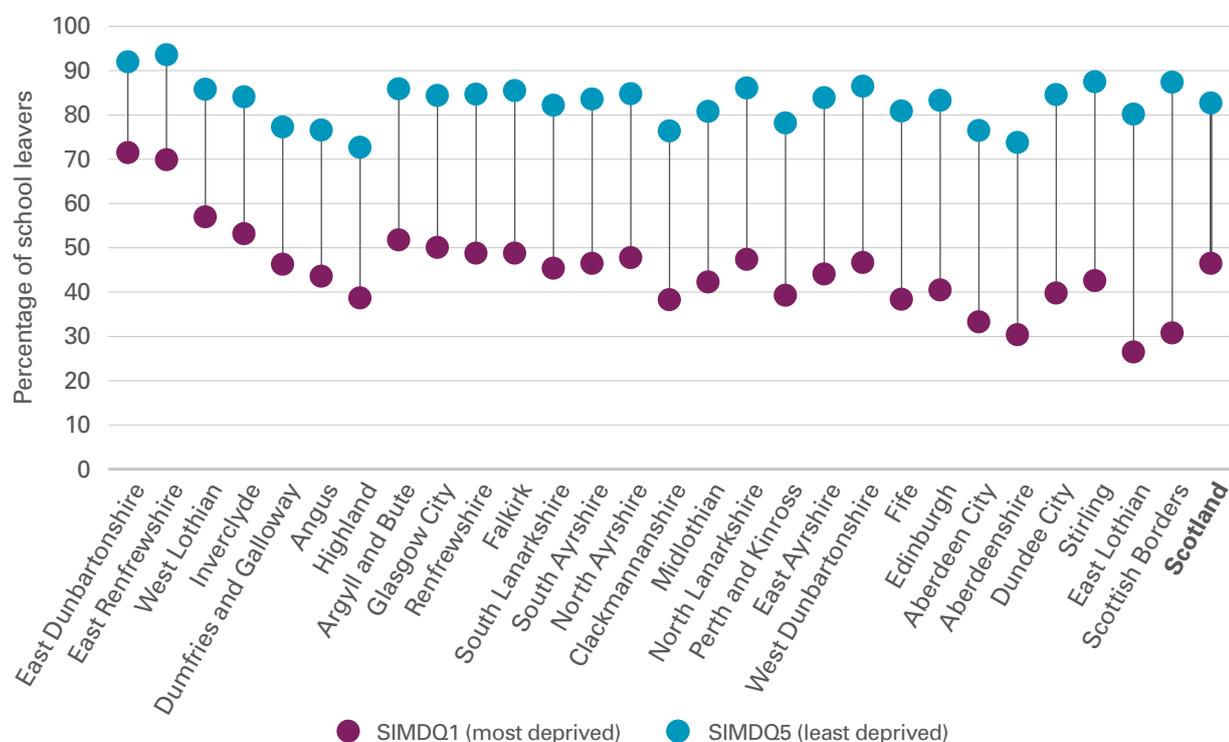


Nationally, the poverty-related attainment gap has narrowed slightly, mainly because the performance of those from the most deprived SIMD quintile has improved at a faster rate

Exhibit 4

Gap between most deprived and least deprived pupils in percentage of school leavers achieving five or more awards at level 5 2018/19

The gap between SIMD Quintile 5 (least deprived) and SIMD Quintile 1 (most deprived) is evident at a local level, with some councils reporting much bigger gaps than others.



Source: Insight. Due to small numbers this analysis does not include Moray, Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.

62. Based on the alternative assessment model for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher awards in 2020, the increase in pass rates was greater for pupils from the most deprived areas than for pupils from the least deprived areas:

- At National 5 the attainment gap measured by pass rate decreased from 17.1 percentage points to 7.8 percentage points.
- At Higher it decreased from 16.4 percentage points to 6.4 percentage points.
- At Advanced Higher it decreased from 13.6 percentage points to 2.7 percentage points.⁵⁰

Reducing the poverty-related attainment gap is a complex challenge and will take time but improvement needs to happen more quickly

63. The Scottish Government committed to reducing the poverty-related attainment gap over the lifetime of this parliament (2016–2021). There is broad recognition among Scottish Government, Education Scotland, councils and schools that the complexity of contributory factors means that it will take time to significantly reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. The 2018 NIF Plan identified stretch aims for the NIF indicators, for each SIMD quintile. The latest

NIF Plan states that none of the measures are currently narrowing to the extent shown by the stretch aims.⁵¹ The Scottish Government has explicitly said that stretch aims are not targets, but challenging ambitions. Improvement will need to happen more quickly if substantial inroads are to be made in reducing the gap, particularly in view of the unequal effects of Covid-19.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge and Attainment Scotland Fund are important elements of the drive to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap

64. The Scottish Government launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) in 2015, supported by the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). This funding is intended to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap over the course of this parliament, with further funding announced for 2021/22. £488 million of the ASF funding was for the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) between 2017/18 and 2020/21, with this money going directly to schools based on the number of pupils eligible for free school meals.⁵²

65. Nine councils with the highest levels of deprivation based on SIMD received £212 million funding through the ASF, and a further £36 million was allocated to schools with high levels of deprivation across all council areas. The remainder was allocated to national programmes (£39 million) and specific targeting for care-experienced children and young people (£29 million). After the initial closure of schools in March 2020, the Scottish Government issued guidance to councils that use of the ASF could be more flexible, citing examples where funding had been already used to provide digital devices, books and other learning material, transport for children to attend school hubs and supporting home-school link workers to maintain contact with children.⁵³

Councils and schools are using the Attainment Scotland Fund in different ways in response to local needs. There is more scope for sustained improvement where the approach is one that aims to develop and embed practice

66. Most ASF funding is being spent on staffing; programmes focused on transitions between different stages of education, such as from primary to secondary; literacy and numeracy; teaching methods; quality of teaching and leadership; and wellbeing and nutrition.

67. In some cases, councils and schools are funding specific activities, for example programmes to offset the impact of poverty by reducing the cost of the school day to families (such as paying for equipment and trips) so that all learners have the same opportunities. Schools and councils have also employed or contracted additional specialist support such as family link workers and speech and language therapists. Councils told us it would be difficult to pay for this extra support without the additional funding.

68. Other uses of the fund have the potential to be more sustainable in the longer term, such as those where funding has been used to improve teaching expertise and practice and this can be embedded within the school or local education system. In 2017 and 2018, Education Scotland carried out inspections of all nine attainment challenge councils to assess their progress.⁵⁴ They highlighted sustainability as a concern, particularly given the temporary nature of ASF funding. The inspections also noted the need to integrate ASF-funded activity with core services to add value.



£736 million from the ASF has been allocated to schools and councils since 2015

Headteachers believe the Attainment Scotland Fund is making a difference for pupils. However, it is too early to see evidence of its long-term impact on outcomes, and performance data on attainment does not indicate improvement across all indicators and all councils

69. It is hard to identify the long-term impact of SAC and the ASF on outcomes at this stage as it will take time for changes to filter through. Performance data suggests that the impact of the funding on attainment is limited so far. However, case studies, school reports and evidence from the third interim evaluation of the ASF, published in October 2020, indicate that it is making a difference for pupils. A survey of headteachers in the latest evaluation found:

- 91 per cent of headteachers reported they have seen an improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap as a result of the ASF approaches, an increase of 13 percentage points since 2017
- 98 per cent of headteachers expected to see improvement in closing the gap in the following five years
- headteachers most likely to report an improvement in closing the gap were those that had seen a change in culture or ethos and where there was improved understanding of the barriers faced by pupils and families
- headteachers who felt confident using evidence to inform their approach were also most likely to report an improvement in closing the gap.⁵⁵

70. Schools and councils are getting better at identifying needs, reviewing what works, and determining the impact on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. They are being supported in this by RICs and Education Scotland. There is scope to achieve greater consistency and impact across the system through evaluation and transfer of learning.

71. The 2017 and 2018 Education Scotland inspections of the challenge councils found that there was progress across all councils, with excellent progress in Glasgow City and Renfrewshire.⁵⁶ In the majority of attainment challenge councils, data is being used effectively to inform all aspects of the work of the SAC and senior officers make good use of data to support and challenge their schools.

72. Given the level of resource that has been targeted through the ASF and the slow rate of improvement in attainment, if the ASF continues in some form beyond the current funding period the Scottish Government needs to be clearer about the anticipated pace of change, identify and measure against appropriate milestones, and consider the lessons about what works in determining how funding is directed.

The way that ASF funding has been targeted does not fully capture pupils living in poverty. The economic consequences of Covid-19 require a fresh assessment of the criteria for targeting poverty-related funds

73. There is a perception among some non-attainment challenge councils that the provision of higher levels of ASF funding to the nine attainment challenge councils is having a negative effect on those in the middle who may have a lot of pupils experiencing challenges related to deprivation, but do not receive additional money from this part of the programme.

98 per cent of headteachers expected to see improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the following five years

74. The methodology behind how the Scottish Government targeted SAC does not fully reflect broader demographic issues, for example adequately taking account of rural poverty and the costs of delivering education in remote communities. Nor does it reflect isolated deprivation in more affluent areas, or councils with high numbers of pupils in deprived areas but proportionately less, compared with some attainment challenge councils with smaller populations.

75. Covid-19 has had, and will continue to have, a detrimental impact on unemployment, the labour market and poverty. It may also lead to a corresponding change in the distribution of people living in poverty. These factors will have implications for how support is targeted, including how pupils are identified and supported quickly. It also raises questions about the scale and duration of targeted funding that will be necessary. The Scottish Government is considering this as it develops the next version of the SAC.

The effects of Covid-19 are likely to increase levels of inequality experienced by children and young people

76. The impact of Covid-19 on outcomes for children and young people is influenced by their circumstances including their experience of poverty and deprivation both before the onset of the pandemic and since.

77. Economic impacts and public health measures are likely to increase inequality as more people become unemployed or experience reduced income, with a resulting rise in child poverty.⁵⁷ In a survey of teachers, there were significant differences in the answers to questions from teachers working in the most and least deprived areas; 57 per cent of teachers working in the most deprived areas expected more students to be malnourished as a result of school closures due to Covid-19, compared to three per cent of those working in the least deprived areas.⁵⁸ A survey of young people of colour carried out during lockdown reported that 45 per cent of respondents felt they had fewer opportunities than their white counterparts before the pandemic and that this has been exacerbated. Two-thirds of respondents thought that compared with their white counterparts their education was at greater risk as a consequence of Covid-19.⁵⁹

At different stages of the pandemic there has been variation in the learning experience of children and young people which is likely to increase the poverty-related attainment gap

78. During the first lockdown (March – June 2020), young people from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced difficulties in learning due to factors such as lack of access to IT and suitable workspaces, and caring responsibilities.

79. The level of support available from families also influenced the take-up of home learning. Access to devices and broadband was a significant inhibitor, as was parental knowledge and understanding of the various platforms used by schools. The Children's Commissioner stated that families reported many problems in relation to digital access including lack of devices, only having phones to access the internet, and not having access to Wi-Fi.⁶⁰ Among teachers, 57 per cent thought that having poor or no internet was a barrier to home learning and 64 per cent said that having no access to technology was a barrier to home learning.⁶¹

80. Two-thirds of teachers (and 78.3 per cent of heads and deputies) said that their students' challenging home circumstances including illness, financial problems, limited access to food and domestic abuse were a barrier to home learning.⁶² In the same survey, 61 per cent of teachers thought that low student participation

Two-thirds of teachers said that their students' challenging home circumstances were a barrier to home learning

was a barrier to delivering home learning.⁶³ Most teachers said their highest attaining students were engaging with online learning better than their lowest attaining students. Teachers also thought that their lowest attaining students' learning would suffer more from the lack of contact with other students compared to their highest attaining students.⁶⁴ During lockdown, books and materials were delivered to vulnerable families and some schools were not only delivering schoolwork to children's homes, but also food and clothing.

81. Between schools returning in August 2020 and closing again in January 2021, young people from more disadvantaged areas have had a higher percentage of Covid-19-related absences than those from areas with less disadvantage. When schools initially reopened the distribution of Covid-19-related absences was more even, differing between areas by at most 0.2 per cent. In the months since, there have been times when the most disadvantaged areas have had more than double the percentage of absences due to Covid-19-related reasons than the least disadvantaged areas. In mid-November, for example, the absence rate in the least disadvantaged areas was around 3.2 per cent compared with 6.6 per cent in the most disadvantaged areas.⁶⁵ The variation in absence rates could affect the poverty-related attainment gap and was part of the rationale for the decision to halt the diet of exams in 2021, in the interests of equity and fairness.⁶⁶

82. Digital exclusion has been identified by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland as a significant risk in exacerbating existing inequalities.⁶⁷ The Scottish Government has invested £25 million in reducing the number of children and young people digitally excluded.⁶⁸ However, there are still people and communities that do not have access to an affordable or reliable internet connection. Good internet connectivity is a challenge for some councils, particularly in rural areas.⁶⁹

83. The Scottish Government and its partners have taken action to reduce digital exclusion, and we recognise the challenges and scale of the endeavour, however, the response has taken some time to fully implement. At December 2020 over 58,000 devices had been provided to learners, against an original target of 70,000, and 10,000 internet connections had been provided.

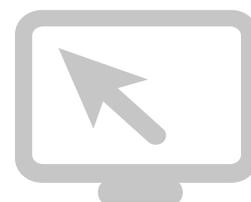
84. During the first lockdown and subsequently while self-isolating, pupils' experiences of remote learning and teaching have been variable, with different approaches and levels of provision across the country, councils and schools.

85. Due to the timing of the audit work, we have not looked at remote learning in the second lockdown.

The education sector recognises that addressing inequalities has to be at the core of the longer-term plans for education recovery, improvement and achievement of outcomes

86. The latest version of the NIF continues to stress the importance of achieving equity with a particular focus on closing the attainment gap as a key priority for the Scottish Government. The NIF outlines actions the Scottish Government has taken to reduce the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the attainment gap including funding extra teaching and support staff, and providing free school meals during the school holidays and digital support for disadvantaged pupils.

[Spending on education \(page 42\)](#) looks at this extra funding in more detail.



At December 2020 over 58,000 devices and 10,000 internet connections had been provided

87. The Scottish Government, councils and their partners need to fully understand the impact of Covid-19 on all young people and gather the relevant data if they are to support the development of appropriate responses. The Scottish Government published an equity audit in early 2021.⁷⁰ The audit aimed to understand the impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report identified five key areas to focus on for accelerating recovery:

- health and wellbeing support
- digital infrastructure and connectivity
- support to parents and families
- teaching provision and quality of learning
- support for teachers and wider workforce.

88. The Scottish Government plans to use the evidence from the equity audit, alongside the most recent published NIF, the report from the International Council of Education Advisors, and the five-year impact report on the SAC (yet to be published) to continue to support learning and reduce inequality, including in its development of plans to replace the SAC which ends in 2021.⁷¹

Working together to improve outcomes

- 1** Before the Covid-19 pandemic, schools, councils and Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) were already working together constructively and with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland around a shared vision of improving education outcomes.
- 2** This strong foundation helped in the delivery of a rapid and nationally coordinated response to the pandemic, in exceptionally challenging circumstances. The Covid-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) is a particularly good example of effective joint working during this time. Collaboration between councils in their response to the pandemic was strong, particularly through Directors of Education in their involvement with the CERG and the Association of Directors of Education (ADES), their professional network.
- 3** The RICs are still developing and have the potential to be key drivers of improvement provided that they have broad local engagement and that they add value to what is already happening in councils and schools.
- 4** Empowering pupils, parents and teachers is an important part of the recent education reforms. Those involved in education recognised that the initial response to the pandemic needed to be centrally controlled and consistent, while still allowing schools and councils to decide how best to support local pupils. Teachers, schools, pupils and parents working together will be key to a successful recovery.

- 5** At the start of the pandemic there was a shift to remote learning, and support for this was provided nationally. There was, however, significant local variation in the delivery and take-up of remote learning during the first lockdown.
 - 6** The approach to parental and pupil engagement varies to take account of local circumstances and the level of priority it is given by schools and councils. There is scope for the Scottish Government and councils to be more proactive in communicating with children and young people about how their views have been taken into account in the decision-making process.
-

The education sector was working well together before Covid-19 with an agreed approach on delivering education reform

89. Before the pandemic, schools, councils and RICs were already working constructively with each other and with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland around a shared vision of improving education outcomes. This alignment was reflected in how the NIF priorities and drivers for improvement are used in education planning ([paragraphs 12 and 95](#)).

90. The Joint Agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA reached in 2018 set out a mutually agreed approach to delivering education reforms and a shared commitment to empower schools by moving more decision-making and responsibility to local level.⁷² It also recognises the part played by ‘strong leadership, collaborative working and clarity of purpose at all layers of the system and the notion of the empowered school within a collaborative community’.

91. Since the publication of the Joint Agreement, the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, COSLA, ADES and a range of stakeholders have worked together to develop draft guidance on how to move towards a more empowered system of more local decision-making in collaboration.⁷³

92. The education reforms have introduced change into the Scottish system by creating RICs and promoting local empowerment. The bodies involved in planning, delivering and improving school education are making progress in implementing the reforms though it is too early to judge their impact on outcomes.

93. The RICs are still developing and have the potential to be key drivers of improvement provided that they have broad local engagement with councils, schools and other partners, such as third sector organisations and employers, and that they add value to what is already happening to improve education outcomes. Early concerns that RICs could encroach upon the role of councils in delivering education outcomes have diminished and stakeholders are clear that local accountability for improving outcomes remains with councils.

94. The School Empowerment Group, which includes representation from across the sector, published a draft evaluation strategy setting out how school empowerment will be evaluated, but this does not focus on outcomes or set out its relationship with the NIF indicators. The aims of the strategy are concerned with assessing stakeholder engagement and understanding how well the empowerment agenda is embedded across the system, and what is and is not working well in moving towards empowerment.

Councils, schools and others are working together using the six drivers in the National Improvement Framework to improve outcomes

95. Schools, councils, RICs and Education Scotland are carrying out quality improvement through multiple channels. They are working to improve outcomes by taking action and making progress nationally and locally in relation to the six drivers of improvement set out in the NIF:

- teacher professionalism
- parental engagement
- leadership in schools

- continuous improvement in education
- assessing children's progress to ensure actions are improving outcomes
- using performance information to understand what contributes to a successful education system and how it is improving.

96. The strong link between the quality of teaching and outcomes for young people is reflected in the NIF drivers and actions to improve teacher professionalism and leadership. The NIF drivers also reflect the importance of schools and councils making good use of data to drive forward improvement planning. Since the Accounts Commission report in 2014, more data is available to allow schools and councils to look at where improvement is needed. We saw examples of detailed analysis of this data by schools and councils leading to them targeting interventions and approaches at specific pupils or groups of pupils.

97. The Scottish Government, Education Scotland, teaching unions, headteacher associations, councils and parents and carers groups, have developed draft guidance on Empowering Teachers and Practitioners. Our discussions with teacher organisations and teacher and head-teacher focus groups in 2019 found that teachers already felt empowered to utilise their professional skills to make the best decisions for the pupils they are teaching.

98. Councils and schools are increasingly using an evidence-based approach to support improvement. For example, schools and councils have stopped or amended programmes or initiatives funded by the Attainment Scotland Fund where they are showing insufficient impact on outcomes.

Joint working has strengthened throughout the pandemic with the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) working well

99. The strong foundation of good joint working helped education stakeholders to work well together to deliver a rapid and nationally coordinated response to the pandemic in exceptionally challenging circumstances. All parts of the system had to work together and at pace to put in place remote learning for pupils when the schools closed and to safeguard children and young people. The scale of the challenge should not be under-estimated, and we commend the sector for its response.

100. Stakeholders recognised that the initial response to the pandemic needed to be centrally controlled and consistent. As a result, there was less of a focus on local empowerment although schools, councils and teachers still took decisions locally about how to support pupils. Guidance that was issued by the Scottish Government was often developed in partnership with directors of education and other local representatives involved in the CERG and its workstreams.

101. The CERG is a particularly good example of effective joint working during the pandemic. Jointly chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the COSLA Children and Young People spokesperson, the group provides leadership and advice to ministers and council leaders in order to develop the strategic response to recovery.⁷⁴ The group's membership includes representatives of the Scottish Government, COSLA, parent bodies, councils, professional bodies and trades unions. Its ten workstreams address a wide range of immediate, practical and operational issues, and longer-term impacts of the pandemic. Examples include workforce support, supporting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and curriculum and assessment. The group met frequently from



Councils and schools are increasingly using an evidence-based approach to support improvement

April 2020, advising leaders at a fast pace in a rapidly changing environment and producing national guidance for schools, teachers, parents and pupils.

102. A sub-group of the Scottish Government Covid-19 Advisory Group was also created for education and children's issues. This provided advice and guidance to policy teams and ministers, particularly around the safe reopening of schools.

103. The CERG was not part of the process for all decisions. For example, the Scottish Government's final decision to reopen schools after the summer holidays in August 2020 was not discussed with the CERG in advance and represented a significant change in plan with little notice.

Improving outcomes for children and young people through school education requires the contribution of wider stakeholders

104. Wider stakeholders also have a role to play in improving outcomes for children and young people through school education (**Exhibit 2, page 10**). Health, social work and the third sector provide vital services for children and young people to support them in their education for example through youth support workers or mental health services.

105. At a strategic level in addition to the CERG, a COVID-19 Children and Families Collective Leadership Group was established in May 2020 and is chaired by the Scottish Government's Chief Social Work Adviser and SOLACE Children and Families Lead.⁷⁵ The group involves partners from health, social work and the third sector and considers the needs of vulnerable children and families and the support that is required. There is scope to build on this cross-sector working in the future.

Collaboration between councils in their response to the pandemic was strong

106. There was a key role for councils' Directors of Education in responding to the pandemic. Collaboration through the Directors of Education was strong, both through their role on the CERG and as a professional network through the Association of Directors of Education (ADES). This group moved to meeting every week from previously meeting every six months, aiding governance and collaboration.

107. All RICs developed recovery plans which reprioritised workstreams, with particular prominence given to health and wellbeing, practitioner networks, professional development and the use of digital technology. The West Partnership, for example, developed the West OS, an online library of recorded learning episodes which is part of the resources now available to all schools and learners across Scotland.

There was significant local variation in delivery and take-up of remote learning and teaching

108. When schools closed in March 2020, schools, teachers and councils moved quickly to providing remote learning. Education Scotland supported this shift nationally, making resources available online through GLOW, the national digital platform for remote learning. Councils and schools were also able to use and provide other online resources. The provision varied across schools, teachers and subjects, with pupils using a range of different digital tools. There was also wide variation in the extent to which pupils had access to face-to-face teaching from a teacher. The Children's Commissioner and parents' groups, have raised concerns

about the variation in the resources to support remote learning and teaching during the initial school closures, for example inconsistent use of GLOW, the ability of teachers to engage online and access to devices.^{76 77}

109. Working in partnership, Education Scotland, councils and RICs have developed more comprehensive and coordinated national resources and support. This National e-Learning Offer is for practitioners planning and preparing remote or blended e-learning opportunities for children and young people. Part of this is delivered through e-Sgoil (initially developed by Western Isles Council) to provide live, interactive lessons for pupils in senior phase and broad general education, along with study support in a range of qualifications. The National e-Learning Offer also uses recorded content led by the West Partnership, and materials identified by teacher networks and organised by Education Scotland that senior pupils can use themselves to support their learning in a range of national qualifications.

110. The shift to digital learning was a huge change for pupils, parents and teachers. Pupils faced a number of challenges, including access to the digital technology and connectivity they needed to use resources and having the space, time and mental capacity to engage with remote learning at a very difficult and unsettling time. Research by the EIS teaching union in May 2020 found that 61 per cent of teachers thought that low student participation was a barrier to delivering home learning, which highlights the challenge of keeping students engaged in their learning when working remotely.⁷⁸ We comment further in [Inequalities \(page 25\)](#) on the unequal impact of these difficulties on some pupils.

111. In June 2020, councils prepared plans for blended learning for the 2020/21 school year with the expectation that pupils would be in school part of the time and have remote learning the rest of the time because of the public health measures that were necessary. However, these moved to contingency plans when the decision was taken by the Scottish Government to open schools fully in August 2020. Since then, evidence submitted by Education Scotland to the Scottish Government in November 2020 showed that 30 out of 31 responding councils had implemented contingency plans for remote learning since schools returned in August 2020.⁷⁹ The extent to which these plans were used was low in almost all councils and where they were used, it was to support pupils who were unable to attend school because of the effects of the pandemic. Most councils reported a medium or high level of confidence that learners could continue to engage with and be supported by their teachers during periods of remote learning.

112. Education Scotland is providing support for teachers in delivering digitally, including providing online events on digital skills. The CERG Workforce Support workstream developed a range of materials to support staff, including online training and professional development. It has also shared learning and best practice, for example through the weekly *Scotland Learns Practitioner* newsletter, and helped provide peer support for teachers through initiatives such as 'Big Blethers', informal online gatherings for teachers across the country.

113. The Covid-19 response has highlighted the potential benefits of digital learning alongside in-person teaching. Some children, for example those who need ASL and those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), struggle to cope with school full time. Some of these children found the remote learning during lockdown a relief from some of the stress and sensory overload of school. These children may benefit from a blended learning model in the future.⁸⁰ The Scottish Government, Education Scotland and councils intend to look further at the potential of the national remote learning offer beyond the pandemic.



Partnership working has led to more coordinated national resources and support for practitioners in planning and preparing remote or blended e-learning

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on school teachers

114. There have been concerns among teachers about their safety, for example about the effectiveness of risk mitigations put in place in schools, although many expressed support for schools remaining open. For many teachers this has put a strain on their wellbeing and mental health.⁸¹

115. Through the CERG Workforce Support workstream a package of measures was put in place to support school staff in dealing with additional pressures from the pandemic including:

- mental health support for staff
- coaching and mentoring for teachers
- increased support for post-probation teachers.

116. From September to December 2020, teacher absence for Covid-19 related reasons fluctuated between just over 1,500 teacher absences (approximately 2.8 per cent of all teachers) to over 2,600 (around 5 per cent).⁸²

117. Teacher surveys have shown a mixed view of how well they have been engaged and empowered during the pandemic.⁸³ Among teachers, 67.5 per cent thought their school had given them the freedom to tailor learning to their students and this rose to 86.7 per cent among heads and deputies. However, only a third of teachers agreed/strongly agreed that they felt well informed about Covid-19 measures and their impact on education.⁸⁴

Councils and schools have an increasing focus on engagement with parents and pupils to drive forward improvement but the extent to which this engagement is meaningful varies. There are opportunities to build on the examples of increased parental engagement that emerged during lockdown

118. An empowered system demands increased levels of engagement with young people and parents to improve outcomes. The Scottish Government published a national action plan on parental involvement in August 2018.⁸⁵ To determine whether the action plan is having its intended impact, the Scottish Government carried out a census of parents in 2019.⁸⁶ The results showed some evidence of positive engagement between schools and parents, with room for improvement in involving parents in decision making earlier.⁸⁷

119. At council and school level the approach to parental engagement varies depending on local needs and circumstances. Challenges exist, for example some parents are highly engaged and others less so, for various reasons. Some schools are trying to support the involvement of less engaged parents, through interventions such as providing food, childcare for younger siblings, translators, or practical activities during meetings. There is also a recognition by schools, councils and parent bodies that parent councils need to be more representative of the whole student parent population.

120. During lockdown, most children were learning at home. As a result, many parents were more involved in, and developed a better understanding of, their child's learning. The increased use of digital technology has also given parents who have the access and skills, an increased understanding of their child's learning, as well as the opportunity to engage digitally with parent forums.

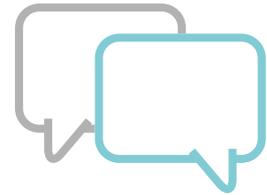
For example, some parents and carers welcomed the opportunity to engage digitally with school and council parent groups from their homes, without having to travel or organise childcare.⁸⁸ This is a positive development that can be built on.

Pupil engagement is happening but inconsistently and not always in line with best practice

121. Pupil engagement structures are in place at school and council levels. For example, in Shetland, the council uses its MSYPs (Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament) to gather opinion as they sit on the Education and Families Committee. The extent to which council and school engagement structures are meaningful and result in pupils influencing improvement is variable. Most schools have a pupil council but students in our focus groups told us that this does not always mean that their voices are being heard. A recent survey of black, asian and minority ethnic (BAME) secondary school pupils in Scotland also found a need for those involved in decision-making in school education to further listen to and value their voices.⁸⁹

122. In the Ipsos MORI Young People in Scotland survey in 2019, 37 per cent of all respondents said that their school was good at talking to them about what they wanted to get from their time at school (34 per cent of females and 41 per cent of males). A fifth said that their school was bad at this. The remaining respondents said it was neither good nor bad, they didn't know, or they preferred not to say.

123. The recent pandemic has led to a welcome increase in children and young people being asked for their opinions, particularly through third sector organisations and at a school level. In some cases, young people's views have influenced decisions, for example in response to the method of grading awards in the absence of exams. However, the Children's Commissioner has highlighted the need for the Scottish Government to routinely assess the impact of decisions on children and on children's rights.⁹⁰ The CERG now has a youth panel but this was only established in October 2020, six months after the main group. The SQA has also now set up a learner panel to work with children and young people. There is scope for the Scottish Government and councils to be more proactive in communicating with children and young people about how their views have then been taken into account in the decision-making process.



37 per cent of young people surveyed said that their school was good at talking to them about what they want to get from their time at school

Spending on education

- 1** Council spending on primary and secondary school education across Scotland increased by 5.1 per cent in real terms between 2013/14 and 2018/19, from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion. Most of the real-terms increase in spend can be attributed to the Attainment Scotland Fund, which the Scottish Government set up in 2015/16 to close the poverty-related attainment gap. When this is excluded, real-terms spending increased by 0.7 per cent during the period, to just over £4.1 billion.
 - 2** Councils spend just over a quarter of their revenue budgets on education. There is wide variation in councils' spending per pupil but no link between that and attainment levels.
 - 3** The Attainment Scotland Fund represented around four per cent of overall education revenue budgets in 2018/19. The funding is only confirmed until 2021/22 and councils highlighted that they will face significant challenges if they no longer have it.
 - 4** The Scottish Government had put over £200 million extra money into Covid-19 mitigation measures and education recovery by the beginning of January 2021. It is not yet clear how much additional cost will rest with local government.
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Council spending on school education has increased in real terms

124. Most funding for school education comes through councils. Our [Local Government in Scotland: Financial Overview 2019/20](#) reports on the financial position of councils. Councils' funding and income increased in 2019/20, however reductions over the last seven years are still larger than other areas of the Scottish budget. Councils have limited flexibility over how they use additional funding, and the financial overview provides further detail on this.⁹¹ The remainder of funding for school education comes directly from Scottish Government and Scottish Government agencies.

125. Taking inflation into account, council revenue spending on school education across Scotland increased by 5.1 per cent between 2013/14 and 2018/19, from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion. This excludes spending on early learning and childcare and spending on special schools and community learning. In 2018/19 councils spent £2.2 billion on primary education and £2.1 billion on secondary education, an increase of nine per cent and one per cent respectively since 2013/14. When the ASF spend is excluded, the increase in real terms over the period becomes 0.7 per cent, to just over £4.1 billion ([Exhibit 5](#)). We set our approach to analysis of financial information in [Appendix 1. Methodology \(page 52\)](#).

126. Spending has increased in some areas and decreased in others. Teaching staff is the largest area of education spending for councils and this increased by 4.2 per cent in real terms (ie when adjusted for inflation) from 2013/14 to 2018/19, from £2.3 billion to £2.4 billion. The second largest area of spending is non-teaching staff, such as pupil support assistants and business support staff, which increased by 16.2 per cent in real terms, from £519 million in 2013/14 to £604 million in 2018/19.

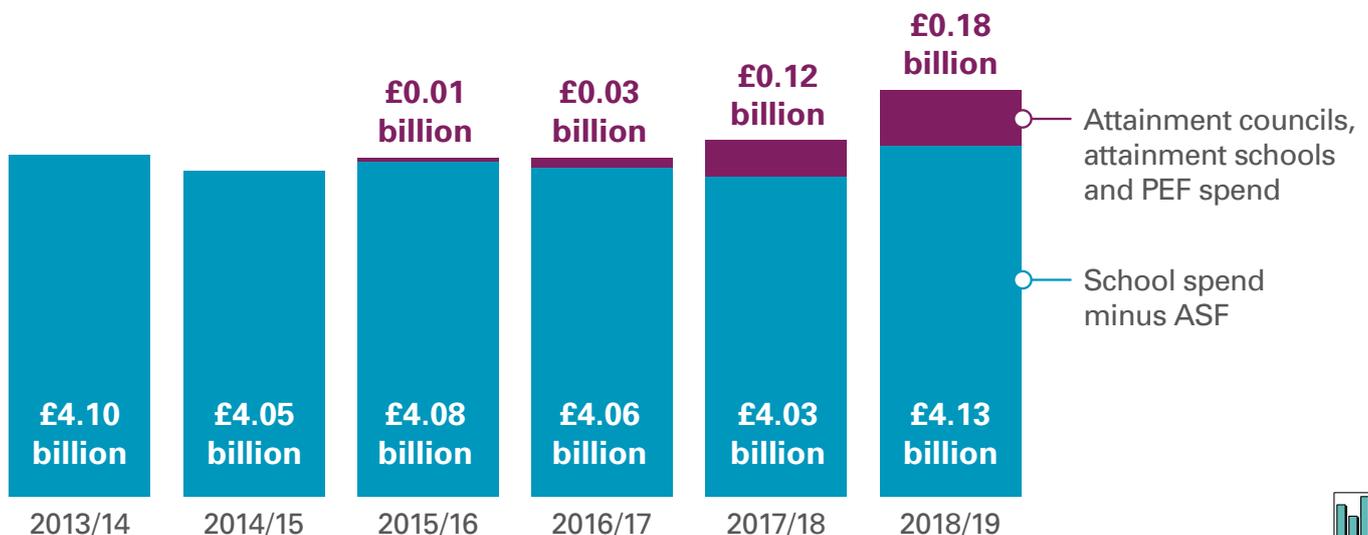


[Local Government in Scotland: Financial Overview 2019/20](#)
January 2021

Exhibit 5

Spending on school education in real terms 2013/14 – 2018/19

Council spending on school education has increased slightly in real terms when ASF money allocated to councils and schools is excluded.



Source: Local Government Finance (LFR) Statistics, Scottish Government. School spending is for primary and secondary schools and excludes special schools.

127. Some of the increase in education spending can be attributed to Scottish Government policy, for example spending on school meals has increased by 12.1 per cent in real terms to £190 million. In 2015, the Scottish Government began funding free school meals for all children in primary 1 to primary 3.

128. Spending has fallen in areas such as school hostels, school transport and additional support for learning (ASL) in mainstream schools. Over the same period spending on ASL has increased in special schools, and in the overall education budget ASL spending in real terms has increased by 8.2 per cent.

Education accounts for around a quarter of council revenue spending and was one of the few services where council spending was increasing prior to the pandemic

129. Council spending on school education accounts for around a quarter of council revenue expenditure. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic it was one of the few services where spending was increasing.⁹² Spending on total education services has increased by seven per cent in real terms since 2013/14, reflecting Scottish Government policies such as the increase in funded early learning and childcare. There are elements in the local government settlement from the Scottish Government for school education where councils have little flexibility. These include increases in teacher pay, teacher numbers and the Teacher Induction Scheme which guarantees a one year post to eligible teaching graduates.

130. Over the same period the percentage of general fund expenditure that was spent on school education (excluding early learning and childcare, special schools and community learning) increased slightly from 26.4 to 27.7 per cent. The percentage varies across councils depending on local needs and decisions. Across attainment challenge councils it varies from 20.2 per cent in Glasgow City to 33.8 per cent in North Lanarkshire, and in non-attainment challenge councils it varies from 18.8 per cent in Shetland to 40.1 per cent in East Renfrewshire.

131. Spending increased in all attainment challenge councils over this period, ranging from 2.0 per cent in West Dunbartonshire to 18.4 per cent in Glasgow City, whereas spending fell in real terms in seven out of 23 non-attainment challenge councils. There are many factors outwith the ASF which affect the change in overall spending. For example, Midlothian and Edinburgh had the largest increases in pupil numbers over the period and were among the councils with the largest increases in overall spending.

The Attainment Scotland Fund is a small percentage of total education spending

132. The SAC is a major policy initiative accompanied by ASF funding. But it is important to recognise that this represents a small percentage of total council spending on education. In 2018/19, ASF spending was £179.5 million, which was around four per cent of total council education spending in that year.

133. The proportion of school education spending that came from the ASF in 2018/19 also varied across councils, from 0.7 per cent in Orkney and Shetland to 9.9 per cent in Dundee City.

Spending on school education fell in real terms in most attainment challenge councils when ASF money is excluded

134. We noted earlier that total national education spending including ASF increased by 0.7 per cent in real terms between 2013/14 and 2018/19, but this

increase is not reflected in all councils. Spending in all attainment challenge councils except Glasgow fell over this period if ASF money is excluded. In contrast, spending still increased in 13 of the 23 non-attainment challenge councils.

The Scottish Government also funds central agencies

135. The Scottish Government also funds Education Scotland to work with councils, schools and RICs and to provide national services. Education Scotland's core budget fell in real terms from £25.3 million in 2013/14 to £20.4 million in 2018/19.^{93 94} The budget for 2020/21 increased to £25.6 million (in 2018/19 prices) to account for additional posts in the organisation and is set to increase again to £28.2 million in 2021/22.⁹⁵ Other funding is distributed through agencies; for example, Skills Development Scotland funds foundation apprenticeships and the Scottish Funding Council funds college provision for school students.

There is variation in spending per pupil across Scotland, and this is not related to the variation in attainment

136. The national average spend per primary school pupil in 2018/19 was £5,259, a real-terms increase of 2.8 per cent since 2013/14.⁹⁶ Real-terms expenditure on primary schools increased by 9.0 per cent over the period and the number of pupils increased by 6.1 per cent. The national average spend per secondary school pupil in 2018/19 was £7,157. This is a real-terms increase of 1.4 per cent since 2013/14. Real-terms expenditure on secondary schools increased by 0.3 per cent over the period and secondary pupil numbers fell by 1 per cent.⁹⁷

137. The three island councils had the highest spending per primary school pupil in 2018/19, ranging from £8,041 per pupil in Shetland to £9,153 per pupil in the Western Isles. There is wide variation across mainland councils, with spending per primary pupil ranging from £4,655 in Falkirk to £6,490 in Argyll and Bute.

138. Our analysis has not found a link between spending per pupil and educational attainment. For example, councils with higher spending per primary pupil do not always have higher proportions of pupils achieving expected CfE levels in numeracy or literacy. Similarly, councils with higher spending per secondary pupil do not always have higher attainment at senior level, and some with lower spending per pupil have higher rates of attainment. Many factors impact on the average spend per pupil such as teacher demographics, local choices over non-ring-fenced elements of the education staffing budget, public-private partnership/public finance initiative (PPP/PFI) contract costs and arrangements, service design and management structure. Access to ASF money also has an impact.⁹⁸

Teacher numbers were increasing prior to Covid-19 and there has been an injection of staff to support Covid-19 recovery

139. As outlined in [paragraph 126](#), teaching staff is the largest area of education spending for councils. There were 49,728 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers in primary and secondary schools in Scotland as at September 2020, up from 46,361 in 2014 (7.3 per cent increase) and 48,550 in 2019 (2.4 per cent increase).⁹⁹ Around 50,000 teachers are based in schools with around 3,000 others centrally employed or based in special schools. Between 2014 and 2020:

- primary school teachers in schools increased by 2,691 FTE, from 22,960 to 25,651 (up 11.7 per cent); the pupil: teacher ratio decreased from 16.8 to 15.4

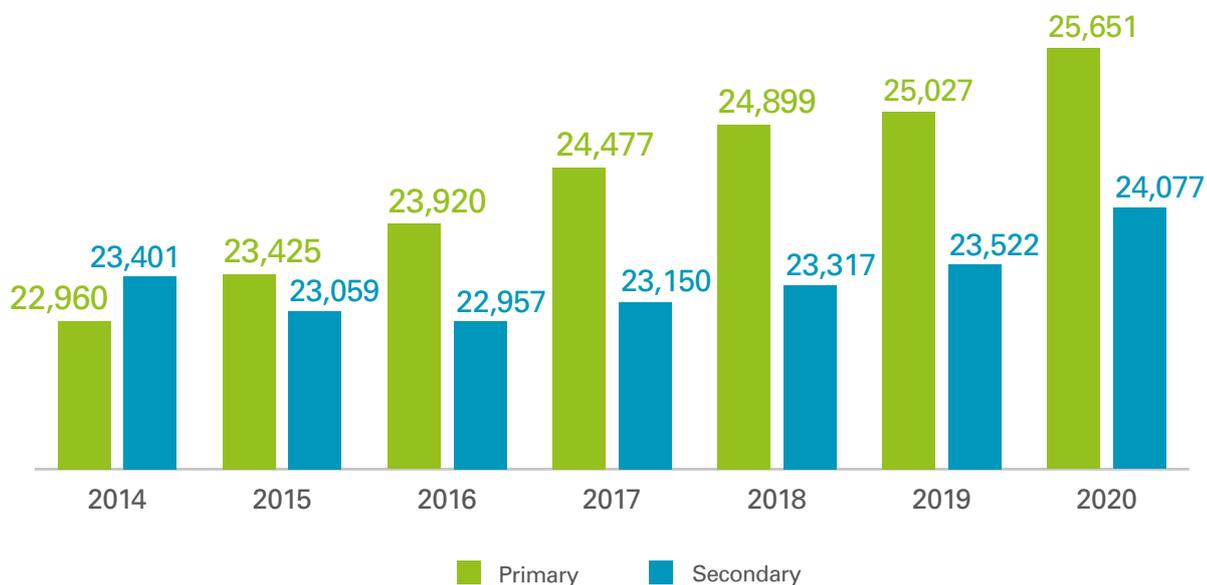
- secondary school teachers in schools increased by 676 FTE, from 23,401 to 24,077 (up 2.9 per cent). Pupil numbers increased in 2019 and 2020, reversing the previous declining trend and the pupil: teacher ratio increased slightly from 12.2 to 12.5.¹⁰⁰

140. The year-on-year increase in 2020 is larger than in previous years because the Scottish Government provided additional funding for staffing as part of the Covid-19 response (paragraph 144). Exhibit 6 shows how teacher numbers have changed year on year.

Exhibit 6

Number of primary and secondary school teachers (FTE) 2014–2020

There was a larger increase in teachers in 2020 following Scottish Government funding for the Covid-19 response.



Source: Summary statistics for schools in Scotland, Scottish Government. Figures taken at census in September each year.

The number of support staff has also increased

141. Changes to support staff definitions mean data is only available going back to 2017. The number of support staff increased between 2017 and 2019, particularly pupil support assistants, behaviour support staff and home-school link workers.

142. Some of the increase may be attributable to the availability of ASF funding. Our data returns indicate that, other than teachers, the most common additional staff recruited using ASF funding were pupil support assistants. The 29 councils that submitted a return together employed at least 55 pupil support assistants and at least 30 home-school link workers in 2018/19 using ASF money.

143. There is some evidence that home-school link workers are having an impact on outcomes. Education Scotland’s review of attainment challenge councils found that home school link workers had a positive impact on attendance, exclusions and engagement in schools.¹⁰¹

By the start of January 2021, the Scottish Government had put over £200 million of extra money into Covid-19 mitigation measures and education recovery

144. Since the pandemic started the Scottish Government has provided or committed additional money to support education. This includes:

- £80 million to recruit 1,400 teachers and 200 support staff (£75 million for teachers and £5 million for support staff) over a period of two years with some flexibility to prioritise teachers or support staff depending on local need
- £50 million for costs associated with health protection measures, enhanced cleaning and other logistics, £20 million of which had been allocated to councils by January 2021
- £25 million to provide digital devices and internet connection to schools
- £1.5 million capital funding for school transport
- an additional £45 million of funding for councils announced in early January 2021 which may be used for the purposes of recruiting additional staff, additional digital devices and providing additional family support.

145. At December 2020:

- councils had recruited 1,423 teachers and 247 support staff
- £24 million of the £25 million for digital inclusion had been allocated to councils. Of the original target of 70,000 devices, over 58,000 had been provided to learners, along with 10,000 connections.

146. The £80 million for staff is to be provided over a period of two years with £53.3 million in 2020/21 and £26.7 million in 2021/22. The Scottish Government has indicated that it expects councils to be able to retain these posts in future by funding them through other teachers retiring and leaving the profession. COSLA has highlighted potential risks with this approach if teachers do not leave at the rate expected.

It is not yet clear how much of the additional costs of mitigation measures and recovery will rest with local government

147. The Scottish Government announced £50 million funding for councils for logistics associated with re-opening schools. By January 2021, £20 million of this has been allocated by local government leaders (through COSLA) using a formula with 90 per cent based on education-related Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) and 10 per cent based on rurality in councils, to reflect the additional cost pressures. The remaining £30 million will be distributed following a cost collection exercise carried out by COSLA, designed in consultation with the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group.

148. The exercise collected actual expenditure data from councils from the beginning of the 2020/21 financial year (1 April) to the end of October 2020, with projected costs for the rest of the year. COSLA is still undertaking quality assurance work on the data returned, however it highlights significant pressure in the following areas:

- Staffing: the cost of extra staffing has been significant for councils, in some cases exceeding the grant provided by the Scottish Government, although COSLA acknowledged the funding announcement in January 2021 may help mitigate this.
- Digital devices and connectivity.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): councils have had to invest significantly in face coverings and other PPE for staff and pupils to minimise transmission of the virus.
- Cleaning: cleaning has been increased and upscaled significantly to comply with public health guidelines.
- Heating and ventilation: schools have had to increase the amount of time doors and windows are left open for ventilation. In the autumn and winter months this has led to additional heating costs to maintain indoor temperatures.
- Additional equipment to avoid pupils sharing: in catering there are more single uses of products and service delivery costs.

149. Councils have indicated that they do not expect the £50 million for logistics to be sufficient to meet the additional costs of Covid-19 mitigation measures, and this will be a pressure on education budgets.

Endnotes

- 1 [National Performance Framework](#) , Scottish Government
- 2 *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan: 2021*, Scottish Government, 2020
- 3 *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Scotland's Strategic Framework*, Scottish Government, October 2020
- 4 Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, Scottish Parliament
- 5 Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 amended by Education (Scotland) Act 2016, Scottish Parliament
- 6 Schools in Scotland – summary statistics 2020, Scottish Government, December 2020
- 7 Scottish Local Government Finance Statistics, Scottish Government, 2020
- 8 Pupil Equity Funding: school allocations 2021 to 2022, Scottish Government, May 2020
- 9 *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan: 2021*, Scottish Government, 2020
- 10 [Curriculum for Excellence](#) 
- 11 *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan 2021*, Scottish Government, December 2020
- 12 Young People in Scotland Survey 2019, Ipsos MORI
- 13 *National Improvement Framework: Consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it*, Scottish Government, October 2017
- 14 *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan 2021*, Scottish Government, December 2020
- 15 *National Improvement Framework 2017*, Scottish Government, December 2016
- 16 School leaver attainment and initial destinations statistics, Scottish Government; Insight Database, Scottish Government
- 17 Exam pass rates are not exactly the same as the indicators we have used to measure school leaver attainment. Leaver attainment for 2019/20 had not been published when we carried out our audit work and we are using exam qualification attainment rates as a proxy measure.
- 18 School leaver attainment and initial destinations statistics, Scottish Government
- 19 SQA post review data provided by Scottish Government
- 20 Data collected by Audit Scotland from councils (based on 28 councils that returned data)
- 21 These include the ASDAN awards (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network), REHIS (the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland), Play Leaders, Open University Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS) and the Prince's Trust Awards.
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- 31 *The impact of COVID-19 on families, children and young people in Glasgow*. Bynner, C., McBride, M., Weakley, S., Ward, S., McLean, J., Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland, September 2020

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- 35 *Equity Audit – deepening our understanding of the impact COVID-19 and school building closures had on children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and setting clear areas of focus for accelerating recovery*, Scottish Government, January 2021
- 36 [Children's and young people's mental health](#) , Audit Scotland, September 2018
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- 47 *Young Person Guarantee No-one Left Behind, Initial Report*, Scottish Government, September 2020
- 48 [Planning for outcomes](#) , Audit Scotland, June 2019
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- 50 *2020 Alternative Certification Model: Equality Impact Assessment*, SQA, August 2020
- 51 *National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan: 2021*, Scottish Government, December 2020
- 52 The national criteria for free school meals are largely based on the receipt of benefits. PEF funding is allocated on this basis. Other elements of ASF are allocated based on the percentage of pupils in each school who live in the 20 per cent most deprived data zones in Scotland, or the percentage of the total school population who live in the 20 per cent most deprived data zones, based on SIMD. SIMD is the Scottish Government's primary measure of deprivation in relation to educational attainment and performance.
- 53 *Coronavirus (Covid-19): supporting pupils, parents and teachers – learning during term 4*, Scottish Government, April 2020
- 54 *How well are the Scottish Attainment Challenge authorities improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap? Summary report*, Education Scotland, June 2019
- 55 *Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: headteacher survey report 2019*, Scottish Government, October 2020
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- 57 *Coronavirus: Considering the Implications for Child Poverty – Supporting local authorities and health boards to consider what steps they can take to respond effectively*, Improvement Service, April 2020
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- 74 [Covid-19 Education Recovery Group](#) , Role and remit, Scottish Government
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- 76 *Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment on the Response to Covid-19 in Scotland*, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, July 2020
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- 97 LGBF figures will differ slightly from LFR figures used in paragraph 125 because the LGBF indicators remove spend on support services.
- 98 *Local Government Benchmarking Framework: National Benchmarking Overview Report 2018–19*, SOLACE Scotland, COSLA, Improvement Service, 2020
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Appendix 1. Methodology

Our objectives

- We carried out audit work in two phases. The first phase of work took place prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. It aimed to establish how effectively the Scottish Government, councils and their partners are improving outcomes for young people through school education.
- The second phase of work took place in late 2020 and examined how the Covid-19 lockdown, recovery and ongoing public health measures are impacting on outcomes for young people through school education. It also considered the effectiveness of the mitigation measures put in place by the Scottish Government, councils and their partners.
- Our audit questions are set out in the [scopes](#)  for the first phase and second phase of the work.

Our methodology

- We conducted interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders during both phases of the audit work. These included the Scottish Government, COSLA, Improvement Service, ADES, RIC Leads, Skills Development Scotland, Colleges Scotland, Universities Scotland, Education Scotland, Scottish Qualifications Authority, teaching unions and professional bodies, national parent groups, youth representation bodies and third sector organisations. We also interviewed the Scottish Funding Council and SOLACE as part of the first phase of work.
- In the first phase we carried out detailed fieldwork in four council areas (Dundee City, Fife, Renfrewshire and Shetland) to gain a wider understanding of school education at a local level. The areas were chosen based on criteria which included a spread in attainment performance, a mix of rural and urban areas and a mix of attainment challenge and non-attainment challenge councils.
- Within each of the four council areas we conducted interviews and focus groups with elected members (on relevant scrutiny committees), Directors of Education, Heads of Service, central education department staff including finance, resources and quality improvement, representatives from local colleges and other partner organisations eg third sector providers, Education Scotland staff eg Attainment Advisers, pupils, parent/carers, head teachers, teachers, trade unions representatives and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) representatives, including employers and Skills Development Scotland in some areas.
- We reviewed documents in each of the four councils including education plans, school improvement plans, PEF plans, committee documents, evaluation reports and annual service reports.

- As part of the first phase of the audit we sought the views of young people in a number of ways:
 - We worked with Audit Scotland’s Inform 100 panel, a panel of young advisers aged 12–25, to help shape the scope of the audit, design questions for the survey and focus groups of young people. The young advisers also helped facilitate two focus groups with youth groups.
 - We added two questions to the Ipsos MORI Young People in Scotland Survey 2019 to help gain the views of young people in schools. These were *What are the top 3 most important things from the following list, if any, you hope to get out of your time at school?* and *How good or bad is your school at talking to you about what you want to get from your time at school?* It is a survey of secondary school pupils across Scotland with 1,731 respondents.
 - We carried out focus groups with primary and secondary school pupils in each fieldwork council area, along with focus groups with two youth groups in two of the areas.
- In both phases of the audit we reviewed national documents including key Scottish Government and stakeholder documents including plans, reviews, inspection reports, evaluations and minutes of key groups. In the second phase we reviewed a range of reports from national bodies on the response to Covid-19.
- We reviewed research reports from a range of organisations, and evidence sessions and papers of the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee.
- In the first phase of the audit we reviewed returns from a data request issued to all 32 councils asking for information on council education structures, finance information, staffing information and wider achievements and qualifications.

Data analysis

We carried out detailed data analysis in the first phase of the audit work, and we updated this where appropriate when we carried out further work in late 2020.

Attainment

- Performance in primary school and early secondary is measured using Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL). The first set of data was published in 2015/16 but we have used 2016/17 as the baseline year due to consistency issues with the data prior to 2016/17.
- We used two sources of data to analyse senior phase attainment up to 2018/19: The *Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations* publication and the Insight benchmarking tool. Data for some indicators is only available at a detailed level (eg council and SIMD quintile) via Insight. We were given access to Insight so we could carry out our own analysis for the audit. The two sources both use SQA data however there are some differences in the coverage including:
 - Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations includes all leavers in a given school year. Insight excludes people who

leave school before senior phase (S4–S6) and leavers from special schools

- in Insight a 'D' grade at level 5 is counted as a level 5 award whereas in the attainment and leaver destinations publication it would count as level 4 (and so on for other levels of award)
- Insight includes awards from non-SQA providers such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award and Youth Scotland.
- We used SQA data on attainment rates for graded national qualifications for pupils in 2020. These are not exactly the same as the indicators we have used to measure school leaver attainment. Leaver attainment for 2019/20 had not been published when we carried out the audit work and we used qualification attainment rates as a proxy measure.
- We used data on the percentage of 16–19 year olds participating in Education, Employment or Training that is published and managed by Skills Development Scotland.

Indicators in exhibit 3

Due to the number of ways of looking at the data we decided to look at four indicators in closer detail. The indicators and reasons for choosing them are below:

- 1 or more award at level 5 (NIF indicator) – This is one of the 11 key measures in the NIF. It affects most pupils.
- Participation (NIF indicator) – This looks at outcomes beyond performance in exams and affects all pupils.
- Literacy and numeracy at level 4 (Insight) – This is a key area of focus for the Scottish Attainment Challenge.
- Five or more awards at level 5 (Insight) – This is a measure of those who have achieved a higher level of attainment in exams.

Financial data

- We analysed financial data from the Local Financial Returns (LFRs) which are used to produce the Local Government Finance Statistics published by the Scottish Government. Financial data relates to primary and secondary schools and excludes Early Learning and Childcare, special schools and community learning unless stated. This data was only available up to 2018/19 when we carried out the audit work. Where we have calculated figures in real terms, we have used 2018/19 as the baseline year.
- Real terms figures were calculated using [GDP deflators at market prices and money GDP at September 2019](#) 
- We analysed additional information on Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund allocations and spending, and RIC funding using some data published by the Scottish Government and some requested directly from councils.
- We used data from Scottish Government announcements on funding, and information provided to us by the Scottish Government and COSLA.

Workforce data

- We analysed data on teacher numbers and other staff which has been published by the Scottish Government. We also used data from Scottish Government announcements.

Appendix 2. Advisory group

Audit Scotland would like to thank members of the advisory group for their input and advice throughout the audit.

Member	Organisation
Sam Anson	Scottish Government
David Belsey	The Educational Institute of Scotland
Jackie Brock	Children in Scotland
Craig Clement (left in December 2020)	Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
Greg Dempster	Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland
Eddie Follan	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
Gayle Gorman	Education Scotland
Gary Greenhorn (joined in January 2021)	Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
Carrie Lindsay	Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
Graeme Logan	Scottish Government
Maureen McKenna (not involved in the updated work)	Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
Janie McManus (joined in October 2020)	Education Scotland
Eileen Prior	Connect
Jim Thewliss	School Leaders Scotland
Maria Walker (left in October 2020)	Education Scotland

Note: Members sat in an advisory capacity only. The content and conclusions of this report are the sole responsibility of Audit Scotland.

We would also like to thank the members of the Inform 100 youth panel who worked with us throughout the audit.

Improving outcomes for young people through school education

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Audit Scotland, 4th Floor, 102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN
T: 0131 625 1500 E: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk 
www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 

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