

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 12 March 2025
9th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry: Post-inquiry Scrutiny

Introduction

1. In 2021, the Committee began its Scottish Attainment Challenge inquiry, looking at how well this money has supported children from deprived backgrounds and the impact of the Scottish Attainment Challenge support on the attainment gap.
2. As part of its inquiry, the Committee considered:
 - What has worked well?
 - What could improve?
 - How is the impact of funding measured?
 - What has been the impact of the pandemic on attainment and achievement in schools?
3. The Committee published its [inquiry report](#) in August 2022. The Scottish Government responded in [September 2022](#).
4. The Committee now wishes to follow up on the progress that has been made on the recommendations it made in its report.

Committee meeting

5. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and her supporting officials.
6. Appearing before the Committee will be:
 - Jenny Gilruth MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
 - David Leng, Head of Scottish Attainment Challenge, Scottish Government
 - Alison Taylor, Deputy Director for Improvement, Attainment and Wellbeing, Scottish Government
 - David Gregory, Strategic Director - Scottish Attainment Challenge, Education Scotland.

Supporting information

7. SPICe has produced a briefing paper for this session which is attached at **Annexe A.**

**Committee Clerks
March 2025**

Annexe A



Education, Children and Young People Committee

12 March 2025

Scottish Attainment Challenge – Follow Up

Introduction

The [2016-17 Programme for Government](#) set out the Government’s ambitions last session to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It said—

“It is the defining mission of this Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We intend to make significant progress within the lifetime of this Parliament and substantially eliminate the gap over the course of the next decade. That is a yardstick by which the people of Scotland can measure our success.” (p5)

To this end, the Scottish Government established a number of policies under the banner of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, supported by the Attainment Scotland Fund. Some of the first programmes in this area were “Challenge Authorities” and “Challenge Schools” from 2015-16 and the Pupil Equity Fund from 2017-18.

In [2022, the Committee undertook an inquiry into the Scottish Attainment Challenge](#). Around the same time, the Scottish Government announced changes to its approach to the SAC in the current Parliamentary term. This included a shift from funding 9 Challenge Authorities and the Challenge Schools Programmes to a Strategic Equity Fund which covers all 32 local authorities. The approach also included a greater role for local authorities to support a wide range of policies to close the attainment gap in their area, along with new reporting and accountability frameworks. A summary of the approach is set out in the annexe to this paper.

Committee report

The Committee published its report on [2 August 2022](#). The membership of the Committee has changed considerably since then: only two of the Members from that time remain on the Committee.

Main Conclusions

The Committee noted that Audit Scotland had found that the poverty-related attainment gap remained wide with limited progress on closing it and that inequalities have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee said that the pandemic had significantly impacted educational outcomes, and called for the establishment of a national baseline to measure post-pandemic progress.

The Committee supported the aims of the Strategic Equity Fund (SEF) to ensure targeted support for all children living in poverty across Scotland, including rural areas. It also noted that the Challenge Authorities would see a consequential reduction in funding.

In terms of the Pupil Equity Fund the Committee noted that headteachers play a critical role in deploying and assessing the impact of the funding at a local level. It highlighted concerns about recruitment and retention challenges as well as ensuring that headteachers have the time and capacity to collaboratively develop approaches. The Committee explored the concept of “freedom within a framework”, whereby headteachers retain autonomy but there is a clearer strategic and oversight role for local authorities and a strong emphasis on consulting teachers, parents, carers and pupils.

The Committee said that schools alone cannot tackle the attainment gap. It said that collaboration with third sector organisations and multi-year funding for these partners is essential.

The Committee also highlighted a need for robust monitoring and evaluation of interventions to measure their effectiveness and impact on closing the attainment gap.

The Government [responded to the Committee on 26 September 2022](#). This response also included the views of Education Scotland. The next subsections highlight some of the key recommendations the Committee made and the Government responses.

A baseline

The Committee said that the Government should establish a national baseline for measuring progress in closing the attainment gap post-pandemic.

The Government’s response acknowledged that COVID-19 exacerbated the attainment gap. The Government highlighted its actions, such as the Equity Audit, to understand and address these impacts. It also noted that each local authority was, at the time, developing its own stretch aims to close the attainment gap in its area. Specifically in relation to developing a post-pandemic baseline, the Government stated—

“Pre-pandemic figures for the current key measures in the National Improvement Framework provide us with one helpful baseline from which we measure progress.”

Local authority stretch targets are explored later in this paper.

Tapered transition from Challenge Authority and Challenge Schools programme funding to the Strategic Equity Fund

The Committee said that the Government and local authorities should monitor the impact of the tapered reduction in funding on challenge authorities and report findings to the Committee along with proposals to mitigate any detrimental effects.

The Government’s response reiterated the policy rationale for moving away from a focus on 9 authorities to supporting all 32. It said:

“Children in Low Income Families data (used for the new funding model) shows that, in 2019-20, 59% of children living in relative poverty before housing costs lived outside those nine Challenge Authorities. Our new distribution model recognises that poverty exists in every local authority in Scotland.”

The Government said that it and Education Scotland would be monitoring any impacts on those areas losing funding. The Government did not commit to report findings to the Committee.

Headteacher recruitment and retention and capacity to work collaboratively

The Committee recommended that the Government set out how it will address recruitment and retention issues for headteachers and ensure they have the capacity to engage meaningfully with stakeholders.

The Government highlighted its commitments to recruit “at least 3,500 additional teachers and 500 classroom assistants”, and to reduce class contact by 1.5 hrs per week. It also highlighted the establishment of the [Headteacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group](#) in early 2022.

The Government said that it was exploring “how best to engage with children and young people from the most disadvantaged background[s] to ensure that they have a voice on how the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme operates and how it is evaluated”. It also highlighted guidance produced by Education Scotland and guidance on the use of SAC funding.

Consistency in education and sharing best practice

The Committee recommended that Education Scotland should investigate variations in educational performance and ensuring best practices are shared consistently and report within 6 months of the publication of the report.

The Government response said that “work is being taken forward collaboratively with Education Scotland, ADES, COSLA and Scottish Government with a focus on looking at how we can address unacceptable variation in outcomes for learners across Scotland.” The Government highlighted the work of Attainment Advisors who work for Education Scotland and provide support to local authorities and schools. It also said that there would be bespoke support for those areas where progress is limited.

The Government also highlighted [Scotland’s Equity Toolkit](#). This is a large pdf document that covers a range of topics, includes guidance and links to other resources, such as research and case studies.

Evaluation of Regional Improvement Collaboratives

The Committee said that Education Scotland should evaluate the performance of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

The response indicated that there would be a further review of RICs. Since then, the Government has announced that it would taper the support for RICs and this money is being directed to support the Centre for Teaching Excellence. (See [OR 7 November 2023](#)).

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

The Committee recommended that Education Scotland monitor and ensure meaningful engagement of teachers, parents, carers, and pupils in planning and evaluating PEF spending.

The Government response noted that this is a matter that is the responsibility of local authorities and headteachers. It also noted that the Scottish Attainment Challenge guidance has a clear expectation of engagement with these groups in a range of decision-making and that Education Scotland provides support through guidance and the Attainment Advisors.

Role of the third sector

The Committee recommended that Education Scotland should examine how local authorities are, where appropriate, ensuring stability of funding for third sector partners and evaluating how such longer-term relationships impact on outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The response stated that the Government and Education Scotland recognise that “the challenge of closing the poverty-related attainment gap and indeed improving outcomes for those learners cannot be achieved by schools alone.” It noted that the funding for the SAC was set out over several years and therefore should provide budget holders the certainty to be able to offer multi-year funding to partners.

Planning on how PEF will be allocated in future

The Committee recommended that the Government undertake planning on what metric will replace free school meals registrations to determine any future school-level national funding (i.e. PEF).

The response noted that the expansion of universal FSM in primary schools will mean that a different approach may be required to allocate school level national funding in the future. It said—

“We have begun a programme of work to identify and establish suitable alternative datasets such as social security data, and in particular the Children in Low Income Families dataset.”

The Committee asked the Cabinet Secretary about any replacement for PEF in the coming years in January. [She said](#) her view was that PEF would remain after the election but gave no further details on how it could be allocated.

Rural schools

The Committee recommended that the Government consider how its approach will tackle the barriers faced by rural schools in closing the attainment gap.

The response noted that each local authority has access to an Attainment Advisor and that the move to the SEF means that more local authorities have access to additional funding. It also said—

“We recognise the challenges faced by rural authorities and communities and will work with stakeholders to understand how through the Scottish Attainment Challenge we can further help mitigate any particular barriers to learning or positive outcomes caused specifically by rural poverty.”

Evaluation

The Committee recommended that the Government commission a longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term impact of the attainment challenge policy at national, regional, and school levels. It also said that Education Scotland should ensure that every local authority has access to relevant external expertise to enable them to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

The response noted that the Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation strategy was being updated in light of the refreshed approach. This would include “carefully considering the use of a longitudinal approach” and the letter said that the Government would keep the Committee informed on this.

The response also highlighted the work of Education Scotland’s Attainment Advisors in developing plans identifying the outcomes from interventions.

Initial destinations and participation measure

The Committee recommended that work should be undertaken to improve how positive destinations of school leavers can be tracked and measured in the longer term to better understand the long term outcomes of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

The response said that there was work to do to improve the understanding of the participation measure which is reported on by SDS. It said that the Government seeks to “increase the focus on this important measure and encourage increased collaboration to improve it.”

Accountability of Education Scotland for Outcomes

The Committee said Education Scotland should be clearer in how it is responsible and accountable for outcomes of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

The response highlighted the role and support that Education Scotland provides to local authorities but did not set out how it would be accountable for the outcomes achieved. The response also noted that the landscape of the national agencies would be changing.

Budgets and funding

The Attainment Scotland fund comprises of:

- Pupil Equity Fund: £130.6m in 2025/26
- Strategic Equity Fund: £43.0m in 2025/26
- Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund: £10.5m in 2025/26 (TBC)
- National Programmes: up to £5m in 2025/26

PEF was introduced in 2017/18 and totalled £120m. During the Pandemic, the Government provided additional funding to schools through PEF. Overall, the funding for PEF has not kept pace with inflation. In real terms (using the HMT deflator), the total funding for PEF in 2025/26 is around 16.5% lower than in 2017/18.

The SEF has been reducing over the past several years as the tapered reduction in funding for the 9 challenge authorities completes. 2024/25 was the final year of that taper. The Cabinet Secretary said in [a letter on 3 March 2025](#)—

“The funding model for SEF and the multiyear allocations were agreed with COSLA and were published in 2022 to give local authorities clarity on budgets to support long term planning. Whilst I acknowledge the impact of inflation, there is no reduction to the core £43 million per year investment in SEF. Part of the funding set out over this four-year period included some initial additional

funding beyond the core £43 million commitment to support the tapering process.”

The move from the 9 Challenge Authorities¹ to SEF meant that £43m was shared among 32 local authorities rather than 9. For example, Dundee City received £6.2m in Challenge Authority funding in 2021-22 and will receive around £1.3m in 2025-26. On average, the Challenge Authorities’ SEF allocation in 2025-26 is 37% of the Challenge Authority funding in 2021-22 in cash terms (i.e. not accounting for the effect of inflation in that period).

[In 2023-24, the value of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund for local authorities was £10.5m.](#) Allocations for the Fund are based on the number of looked after child aged 5-15 in the Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland.

Evaluation

[In 2022, the Government published](#) an evaluation strategy for the refreshed approach to SAC. This strategy emphasised real-time evidence, stakeholder collaboration, and mixed method approaches. The strategy said there would be shorter, more frequent publications with a focus on supporting system change and improvement through regular feedback.

The evaluation strategy had a number of aims, which were to:

- Assess the impact of the fund on educational and health and wellbeing outcomes and closing the attainment gap.
- Assess the extent of progress towards meeting the short, medium and long term outcomes articulated in the Logic Model.
- Increase the evidence base of what works and what could be improved for whom, and in what circumstances, to improve educational attainment and achievement, and health and wellbeing of pupils impacted by poverty within the Scottish policy context as well as contributing to the wider evidence base.
- Evaluate what works and what could be improved around the specific funding streams of the ASF.
- Evaluate the process of implementing the ASF overall.
- Focus on factors that helped or hindered progress, including the impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis.

The strategy had four strands:

- Process implementation

¹ Clackmannanshire, Dundee City, East Ayrshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, and West Dunbartonshire.

- Thematic work (e.g. [families and communities, published in March 2024](#))
- National Improvement Framework (NIF) measures
- Evaluation of the impact of ASF, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

2024 Evaluation

[In December 2024, the Scottish Government published a report](#) on the implementation and impact evaluation evidence since the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) refresh in 2022, utilising quantitative evidence gathered via a SAC Local Authority Leads Survey 2024, and qualitative evidence gathered through national stakeholder interviews. This provides a helpful update on many of the themes of the Committee's 2022 report. This report was organised under six headings, which are set out below along with some of the main findings. Members will note that some themes appear under several headings.

Governance and Support

The evaluation highlighted the work of Attainment Advisors. It said Attainment Advisors provide crucial support and challenge functions, working at both local authority and school levels.

The report found that Education Scotland is valued for its networking opportunities and resource provision. There were suggestions that a more streamlined approach to resources and guidance materials would be welcomed. The report found that the support that the Scottish Government provides was generally positively received; however, there were concerns about the timing of new guidance and alignment with planning cycles.

Funding

The report found that local authorities viewed the ASF as an additional resource, though some stakeholders felt it was also used to fill gaps in local budgets. Local authorities varied in their use of core and other funding to support the aims of the SAC.

Some respondents reported that the reduction in funding for former Challenge Authorities has had a negative impact. The report also said that some local authorities, that had not had LA-level SAC funding, faced challenges in planning their SEF spending effectively. Additionally, respondents said the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated financial challenges for local authorities and schools.

PEF is valued for its flexibility, but the report highlighted concerns about its sufficiency and allocation methodology – for example, where the local area had faced particular economic challenges recently. Instances of local authorities retaining a percentage of PEF and recruitment challenges affecting PEF spend were noted in the report.

Concerns were raised about the time-limited nature of PEF and the lack of certainty beyond the current parliamentary term.

Implementation

Local authorities set multi-year stretch aims for 2023/24 – 2025/26, focusing on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The report found that development of these stretch aims involved data analysis and stakeholder consultation, though engagement with classroom teachers, pupils, and parents was limited.

Improved and more joined-up approaches to planning were noted in the report, with a focus on strategic planning, data use, and collaborative working. There was also evidence of an emphasis on professional learning to support understanding and effective use of data. There were broadly positive views on PEF implementation, with effective investment based on local needs and evidence.

Several local authorities funded Virtual School Headteachers posts through Care Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP) Funding. The report found that CECYP funding also supported working across education, social work, and other partners.

Impact

The evaluation found a generally positive perception regarding progress made in closing the poverty-related attainment gap and improving outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty.

Several factors were identified as important in driving progress, such as collaboration, the smart use of data, and increased understanding and awareness of poverty. Additionally, targeted support, facilitated by ASF funding, has been important, addressing issues such as attendance and health and wellbeing through specific roles and initiatives.

The report identified several barriers to progress. A reduction in funding for former Challenge Authorities has posed challenges, which were reported to have been compounded by wider issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in the cost-of-living, and other external pressures. Declining pupil attendance was also identified as a concern.

Unintended consequences

The report found that the implementation of initiatives has led to several positive unintended consequences. These included: better use of data and evidence within schools; a deeper understanding of the impact of poverty; improved collaboration and partnerships; more empowered headteachers allowing for innovation at the local level. The report also found that there is greater awareness of the barriers faced by care-experienced children and young people.

However, some negative unintended consequences also emerged in the report. Concerns were raised about the long-term viability of the funding given the key role it now plays in school operations. The report highlighted recruitment challenges due to

the non-permanent nature of the funding. Some respondents reported increased workload related to procurement and reporting requirements.

Sustainability

The report looked at 'sustainability'. In this context this is to do with embedding the approaches facilitated by SAC into the long-term approaches of local authorities and schools. The report also highlighted views that there is a need for "continued funding to resource staffing and provide interventions given the long-term nature of the challenge".

National Improvement Framework

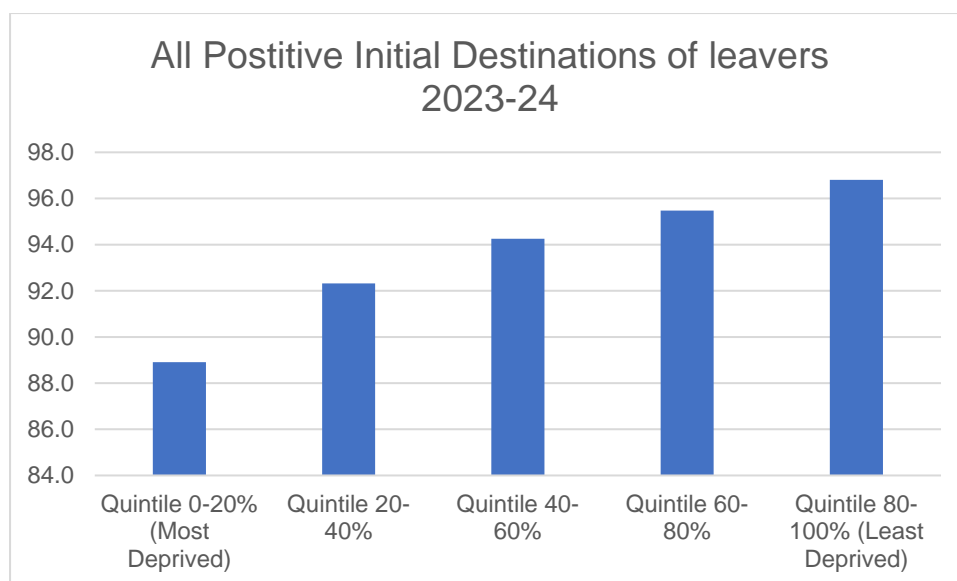
The National Improvement Framework provided and reported on a range of measures to determine both progress in the improvement in education and defining and closing the attainment gap.

The NIF sets out 13 measures to measure the attainment gap. These are:

- 27-30 month review (children showing no concerns across all domains)
- Two Health and Wellbeing measures: Children total difficulties score at ages 4-12 and at ages 13 & 15
- Four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools
- Three school-leaver measures, having at least one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school
- School attendance
- Initial destinations
- 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment.

Two of these measures were added in 2023. These were the School attendance and Initial Destinations measures. The health and wellbeing measure for teenagers is based on the health and wellbeing census – members will be aware that this census was the subject of some controversy and [its future is in question](#).

Members should be aware that while we tend to measure the gap between the most and least deprived pupils or young people. The relationship between deprivation and these measures tends to be linear up the scale. That is, the outcomes/performance of a cohort improves the less deprived it is. The chart below illustrated this for positive destinations, but this relationship will hold for other measures as well.



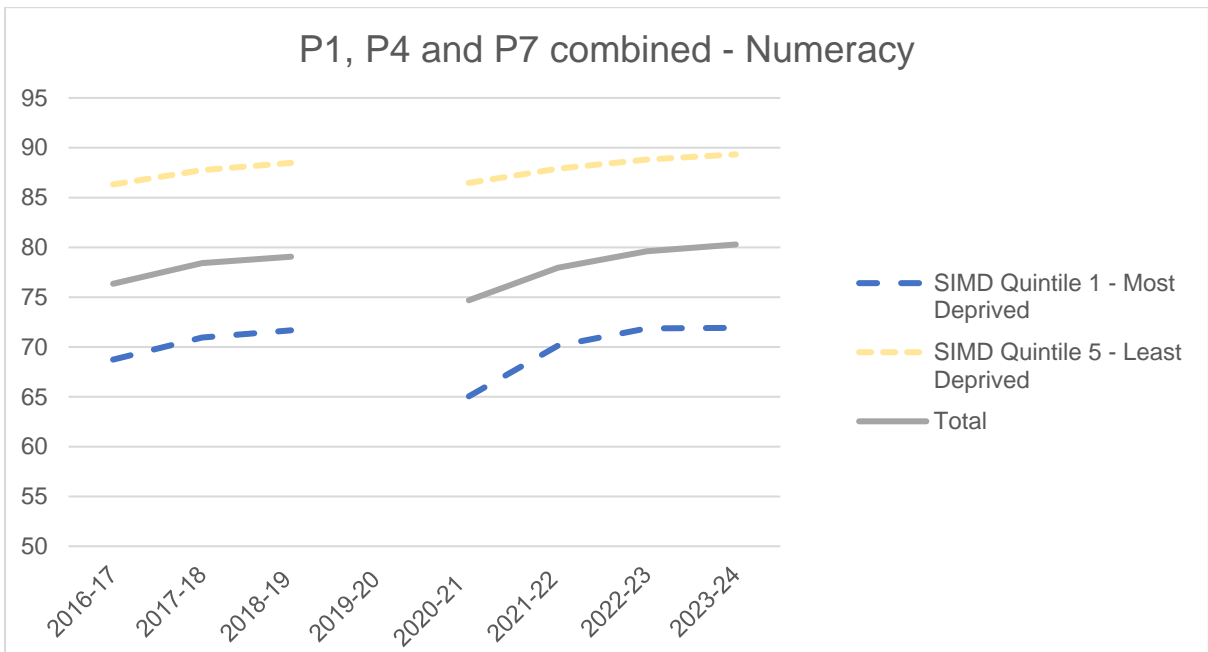
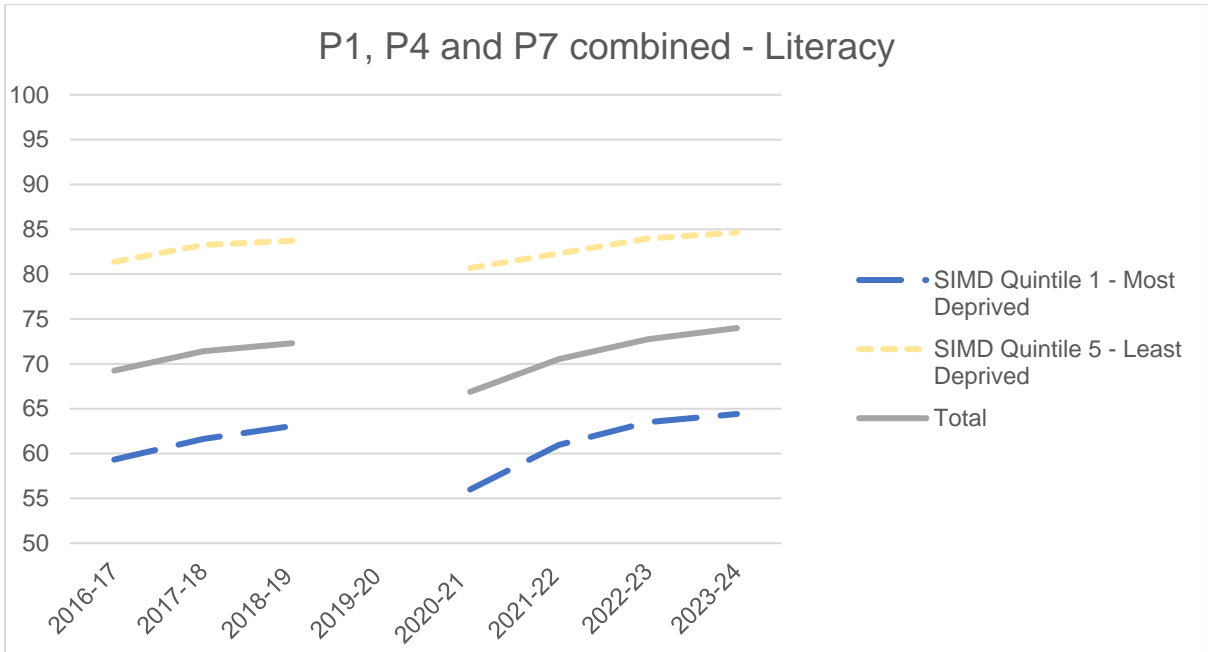
The latest report on these measures was in the [National Improvement Framework 2025: improvement plan](#) published in January. This summarised:

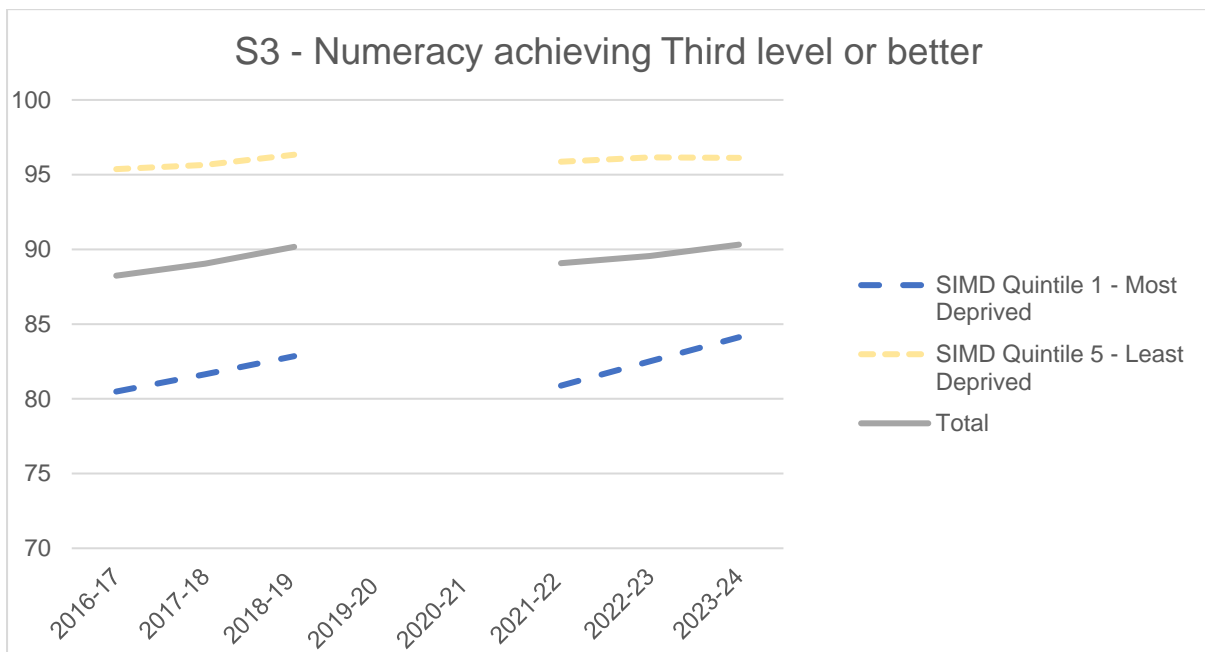
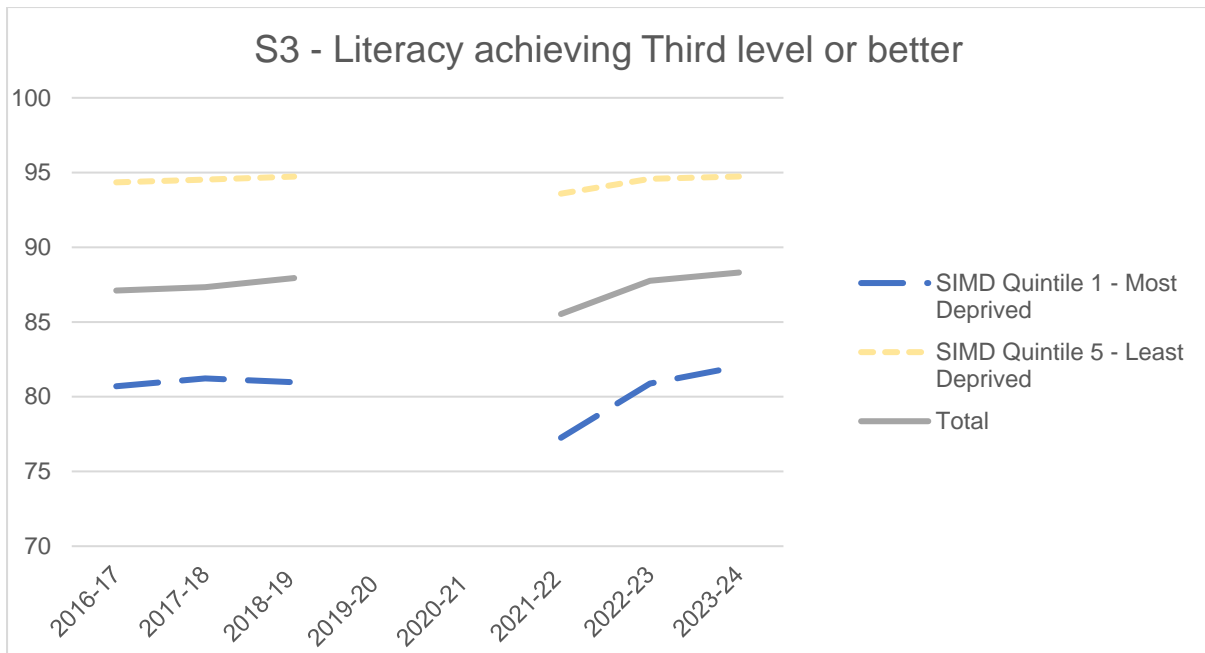
“Of the 13 key NIF measures, the data source has changed for one measure (HWB: Children total difficulties score (age 13&15)) and so data is available for 2022 only. Of the remaining 12 measures, there has broadly been a narrowing of the gap in seven of the measures, and a widening of the gap in five of the measures over time. The percentage point gap is calculated on data rounded to 1 decimal place.”

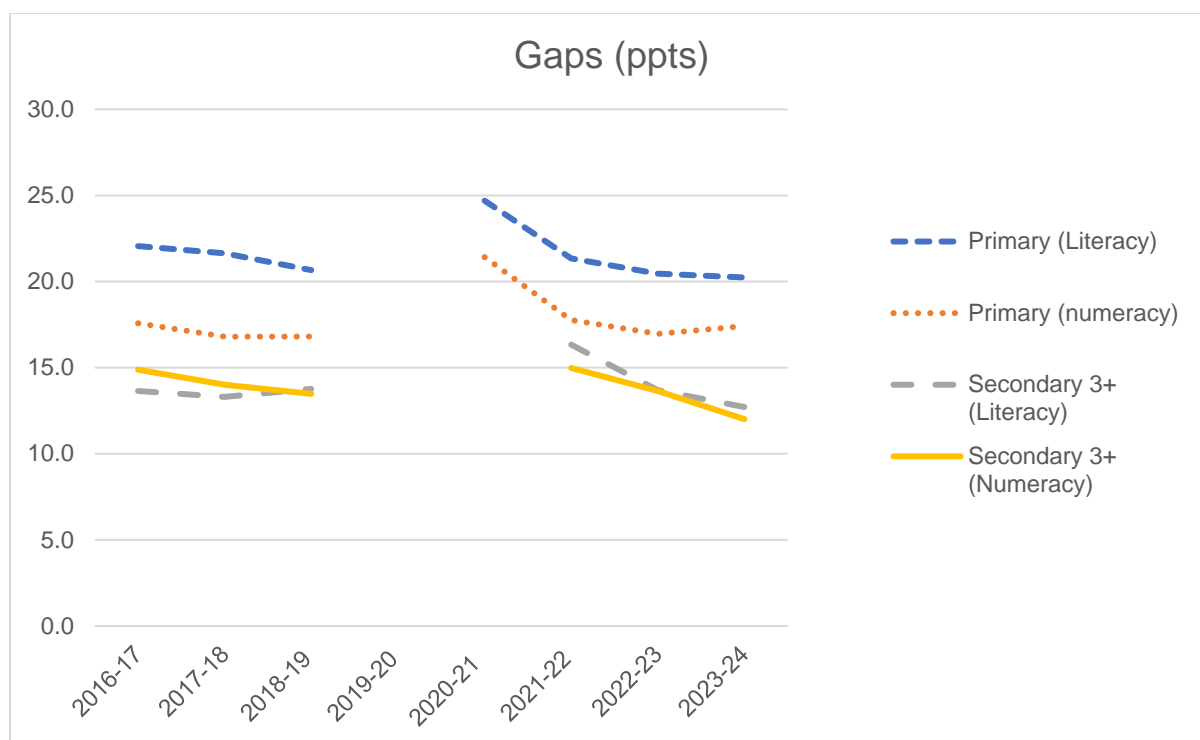
Data collection for the 27-30 month review has undergone a number of changes and challenges in recent years, and therefore these statistics should be used with care. However, the gap between children living in the most and least deprived areas of Scotland showing no concerns across all domains was 14.3 percentage points in 2022/23 – an increase compared to 2021/22 data.

Under the children aged 4-12 with borderline or abnormal total difficulties measure, the gap between children living in the most deprived and least deprived areas has increased slightly since 2012-2015 combined (16 percentage points) and was at 19 percentage points in 2019-2023 combined. The 2022 HWB Census found that the percentage of children with borderline or abnormal total difficulties (age 13 - 15) was 43% and the gap between the those living in the most and least deprived areas was 13ppts.

The four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools are based on ACEL data. Specifically, numeracy and literacy for P1, P4, P7 combined and at S3 achieving 3rd level or better. The charts below show the national figures for the percent that achieved the expected level, the figures for SIMD1 and SIMD 5 and, separately, the gaps.



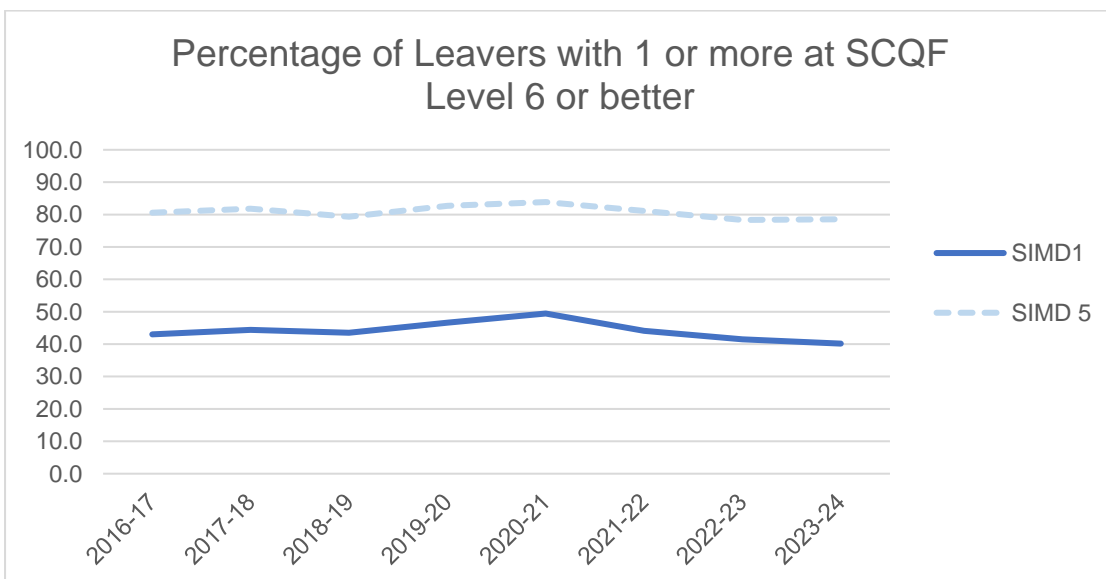
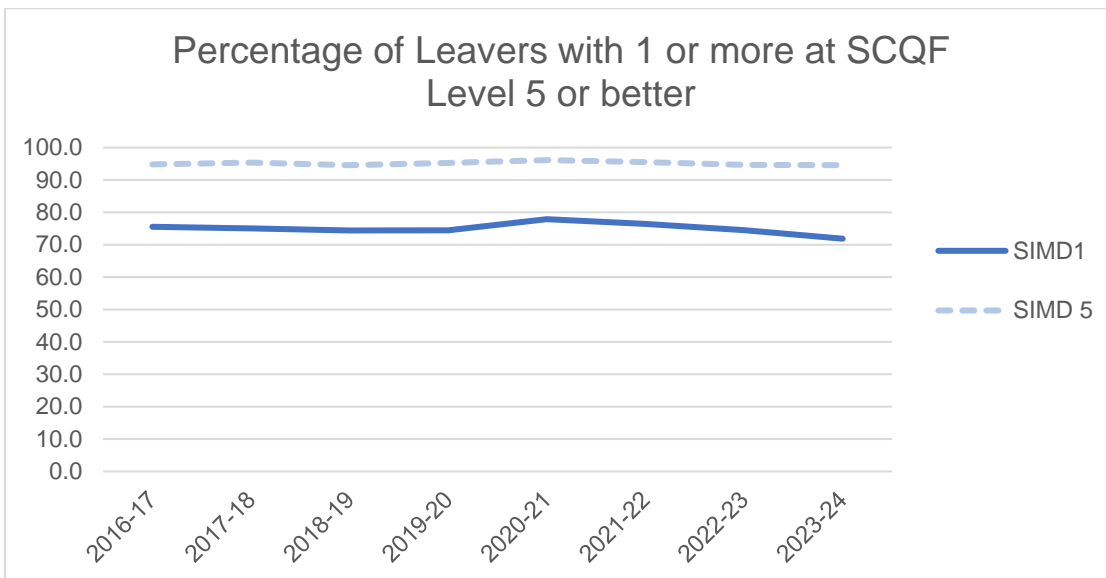
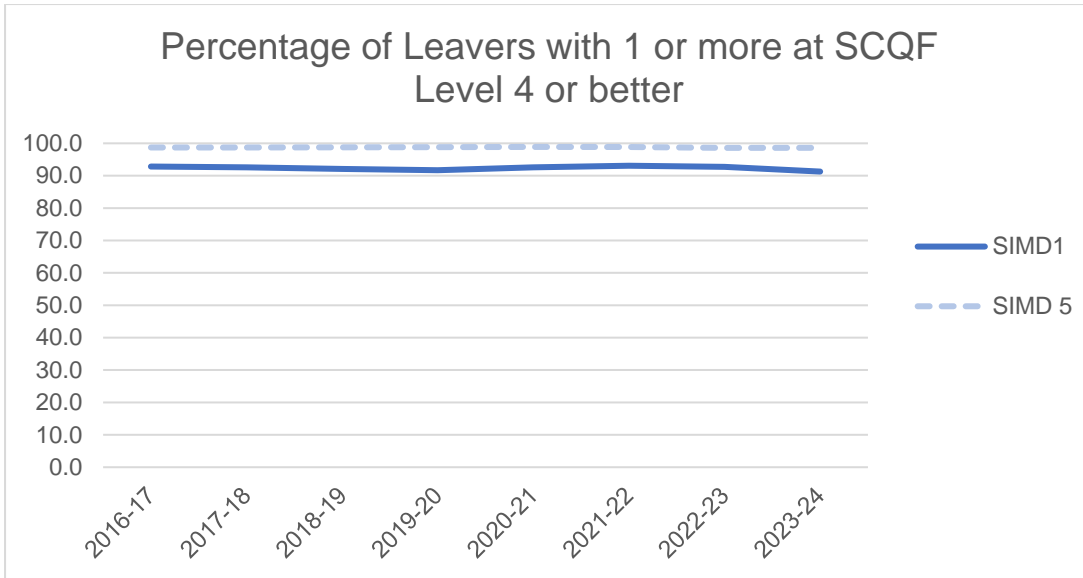


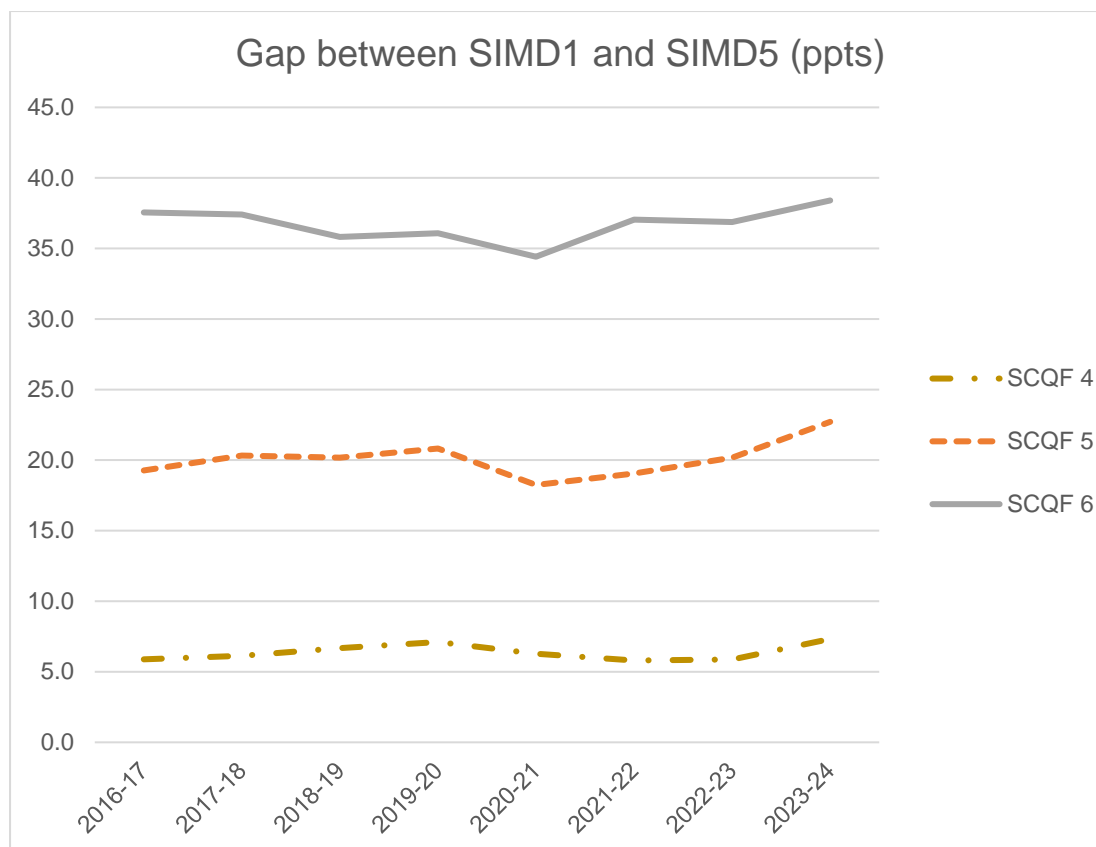


On these measures, we can see that the pandemic impacted on the proportion of pupils achieving the expected levels. However, before and after the pandemic there are trends of both improving achievement on these measures and a closing of the attainment gap.

The three measures on qualifications relate to the percentage of school leavers who have at least one qualification at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6. The NIF uses the national qualifications measure which includes Nat4, Nat5 and Highers as well as Skills for Work awards at those levels. The achievement under these measures increases in the years following the pandemic² which could be partially explained by the improved results in national qualifications under alternative arrangements. The attainment gaps decreased around that period but has grown in recent years.

² Note that the leaver data looks at the qualifications a young person has gained after leaving school, not necessarily the qualification gained in that year.



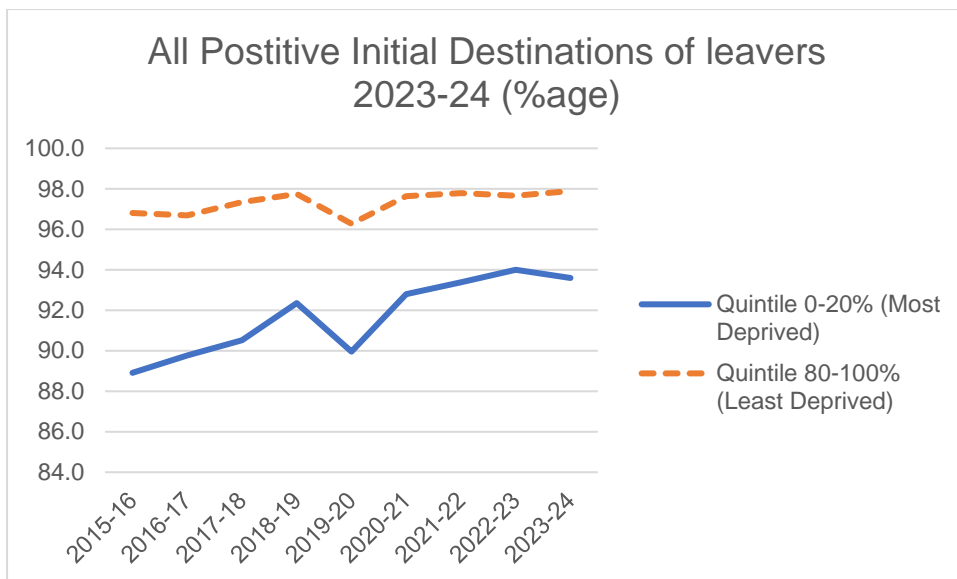


More detailed statistics on school attendance are expected to be published this month. The [summary statistics published](#) in December stated—

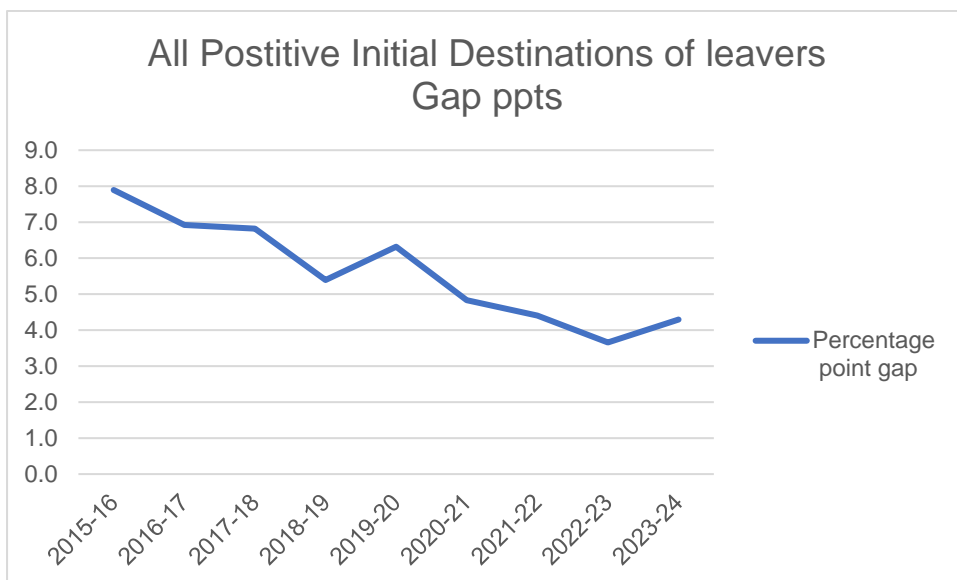
“Pupils living in the most deprived areas had lower attendance rates than those living in the least deprived areas. Across all sectors, pupils living in the 20% most deprived areas had an attendance rate of 86.9% compared to 93.6% for those living in the 20% least deprived areas. This deprivation related gap in attendance rates was greatest in secondary schools, with pupils living in the least deprived areas having an attendance rate 8.4 percentage points higher than those living in the most deprived areas.”

The [National Improvement Framework 2025: improvement plan](#) indicated that the gap in attendance between those living in the least and most deprived areas slightly closed between 2022/23 and 2023/24, from 6.7ppts to 6.6ppts.

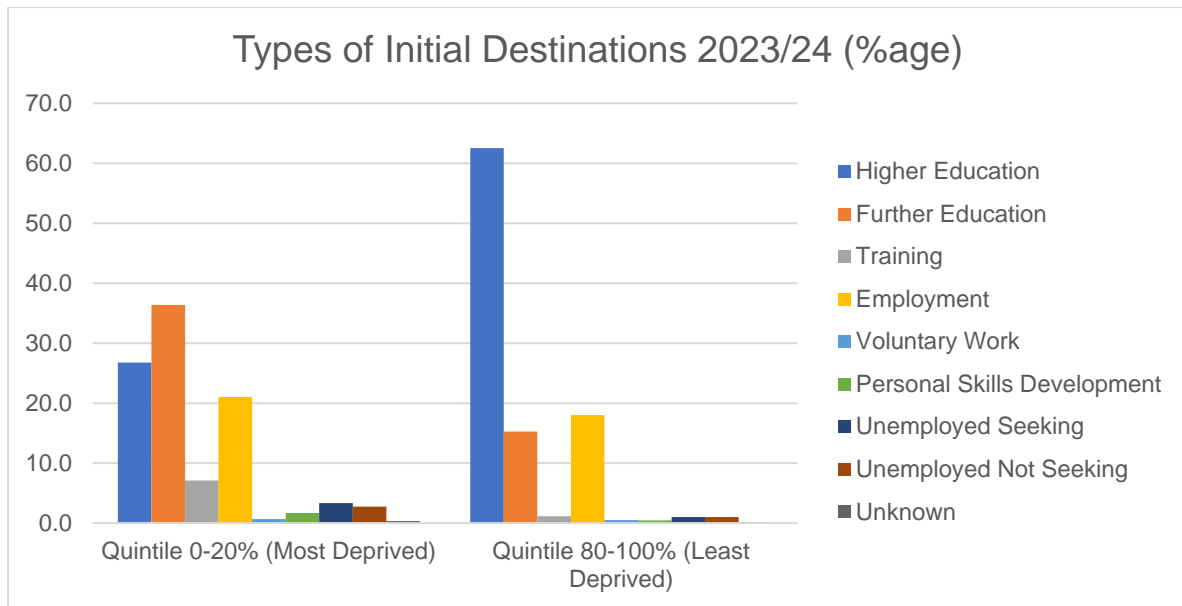
The statistics for initial destinations of leavers in 2023-24 was published in February 2025. This covers pupils who left publicly funded mainstream schools, in the 32 local authorities and Jordanhill. It gives data on the main activities of school leavers three months after the end of the school year (i.e. the first Monday in October). The chart below shows the data for SIMD1 and SIMD5 since 2015/16.



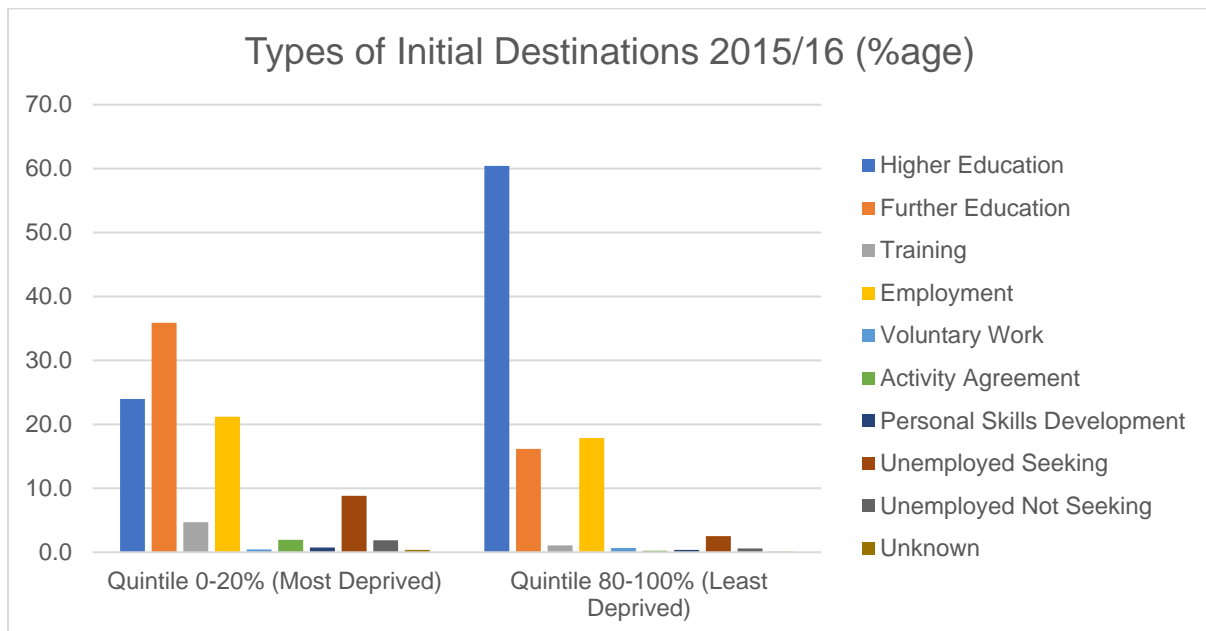
The following chart show the gap between SIMD1 and SIMD5. The trend is that the gap is reducing but there has been an increase in the past year.



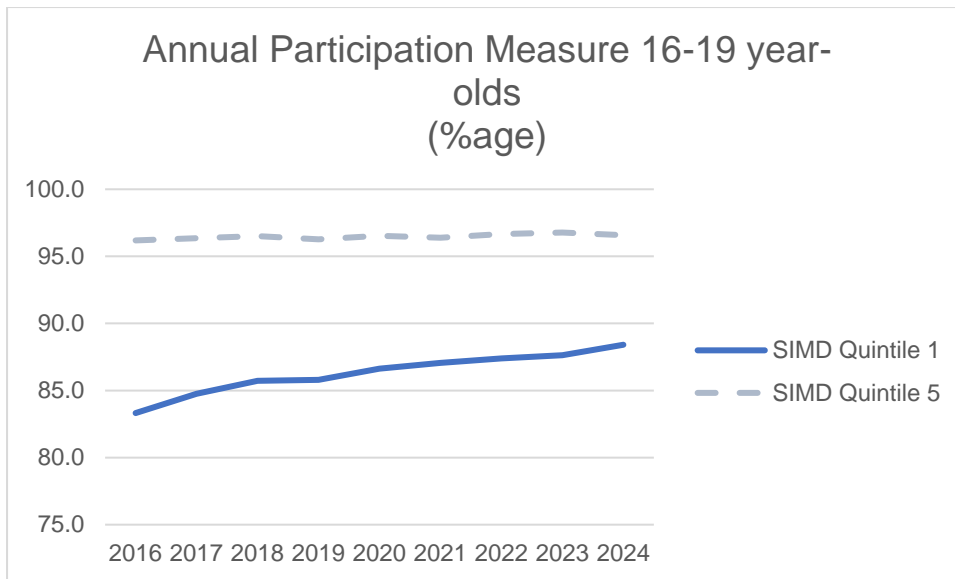
Initial destinations is a broad category. There are significant differences in the types of destinations of the cohorts from SIMD1 and SIMD5. The chart below provides a comparison.



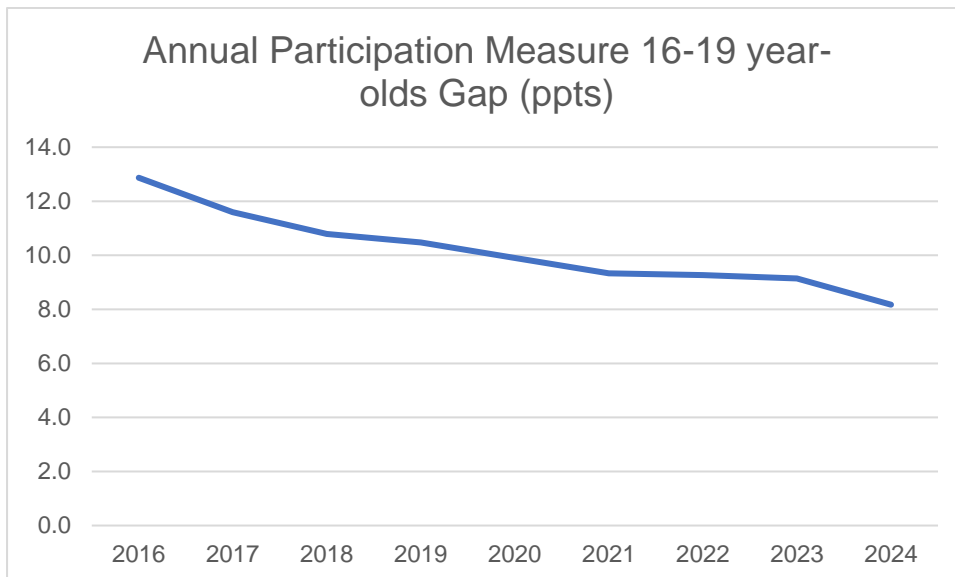
For comparison, here is the same chart for leavers in 2015/16. Broadly speaking the shape of these charts are similar. There has been a reduction of young people who were unemployed and seeking work and increases in the proportion going to Higher Education in both SIMD1 and SIMD5. The proportion of leavers from SIMD1 in Training has also grown by around 2ppts.



The [16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment measure is produced by SDS](#). As noted above the Government’s response to the Committee’s report indicated that it would work to ensure that this measure is better understood at a local level.



The following chart shows the gap between SIMD1 and SIMD5 closing on this measure.



For further detail, Members may wish to refer to the [National Improvement Framework Interactive Evidence Report](#). That report also provides data at a local authority level.

The National Improvement Framework was itself refreshed for 2025. The Government has set out seven Outcomes. One of the outcomes ([Outcome 4](#)) is explicitly related to improving achievement and closing the attainment gap.

The [Cabinet Secretary’s letter to the Committee on 3 March stated](#)—

“I am confident that we are continuing to see improvements in educational outcomes for children and young people, with overall levels of literacy and numeracy across primary and secondary schools at a record high, showing this Government’s approach to education is delivering improvements. For numeracy, this is a record 80.3% of pupils across P1, P4 and P7 reached

expected levels, while S3 also reached a new high of 90.3%. For literacy, achievement is also now at a record high in both primary (74%) and secondary (88.3%).

“Alongside this, looking at young people’s outcomes, the gap between the proportion of school leavers from the most and least deprived areas of Scotland moving into a positive destination is 4.3 percentage points, the second lowest ever and a reduction of two-thirds since 2009/10 under this Government.”

Local government stretch aims

The refreshed approach in 2022 had a greater focus on local authorities’ roles in developing a strategic approach and being accountable for progress in closing the attainment gap in their area.

In 2022, local authorities developed “stretch aims”. These included a “core” set of mandatory aims linked to the NIF measures set out above and “plus” aims in relation to health and wellbeing. The first set of stretch aims covered a single year. The following year these were set for the three-year period of 2023/24 to 2025/26 – aligning to the end of the Parliament and the current agreed ASF funding.

The Core aims for the period of 2023/24 to 2025/26 included:

- Literacy P1, P4, P7 combined (ACEL)
- Numeracy P1, P4, P7 combined (ACEL)
- 1 or more award at SCQF level 5 (All SCQF Awards)
- 1 or more award at SCQF level 6 (All SCQF Awards)
- Annual Participation Measure (SDS)

The Scottish Government has reported that if all the local authorities’ stretch aims in these measures are met, this would lead to the following progress compared to 2016/17. The table below shows the change in percentage points (ppts).

Estimated effect if all LA aims are met by 2025/26 compared to 2016/17

	Increase in overall attainment (ppts)	Reduction in gap (ppts)
Primary Literacy	9.1	6.7
Primary Numeracy	7.0	5.2
1 at Level 5	3.9	4.8
1 at Level 6	6.7	6.4
Annual Participation Measure	4.6	5.7

There is a difference in the leaver qualifications data of the local authority stretch aims and the measures under the NIF. The measure reported in the NIF is the National Qualifications measure in the School Leavers Initial Leaver Destinations statistics. The stretch targets use the All SCQF Measure. [The Government states](#)—

“[This recognises] a broader range of achievement in the senior phase, with all SCQF awards at A – D ... now recognised in the aims, rather than just national qualifications. This recognises the range of different pathways children and young people take and aligns with our focus not just on attainment but on outcomes.”

The National Qualifications measure in the school leaver data is not limited to only National Qualifications; it includes Skills for Work Awards which are the same size as the National Qualifications at the same level.³

The [methodology for the initial destinations](#) helpfully compares the two measures. The key differences in the two measures are how a D grade is treated in graded qualifications and that, unlike the National Qualifications measure, the size of the courses in the All SCQF Measure is not fixed.

In the National Qualifications measure a grade D is counted as a pass at the SCQF level below the qualification taken, whereas it is considered a pass at the qualification taken in the All SCQF Measure.

In the All SCQF Measure, an award at Level 6 sized at one or two SCQF credit points (10-20 notional hours of learning, preparation and assessment) counts the same as a Higher which is 24 SCQF points (240 notional hours). The [Government's methodology report on the Initial Leavers publication](#) highlights some of the issues in making comparisons using this data both over time and across different local authorities. It notes—

“3.7 per cent of qualifications gained by school leavers at SCQF level 6 or above under the All SCQF measure in 2023-24 were associated with one or two SCQF credit points, up from less than 0.1 per cent in 2017-18.”

The “plus” aims are locally determined. [The Government has reported](#) that “attendance and participation were common measures selected by local authorities” and that there is a strong focus on care experienced children and young people across local authorities’ “plus” aims.

**Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research
5 March 2025**

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or

³ The [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) (SCQF) provides a way to understand and benchmark the level and size of different qualifications. Size is measured in points; 1 point equates to around 10 hours of learning, preparation and assessment time.

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respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

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Annexe: Approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge

On 30 March 2022, the Scottish Government published a number of documents setting out its new approach.

- [Framework for recovery and accelerating progress](#) (“the Framework”)
 - The Framework included a refreshed [logic model](#), covering national, regional, and school level activities.
- [Pupil Equity Fund national guidance](#) and [allocations](#).
- [Strategic Equity Fund national guidance](#).
- [Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund national guidance](#)

The Framework sets out the overall approach. It stated that the refreshed challenge will have a new ‘mission’. This is:

“to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap”

The Framework contextualises the continuing work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge within—

- A need to continue progress, and to speed up progress and to tackle variation in outcomes between and within local authority areas.
- A need to address the negative impact of Covid-19 on children’s health and wellbeing and learning.

It also stated—

“Improving leadership, learning and teaching and the quality of support for families and communities and targeted support for those impacted by poverty remain the key levers to improve outcomes for children and young people.”

Roles and responsibilities

The Framework sets out the expected roles and responsibilities of different actors in the education system. One of the shifts under the new model compared to pre-2022 is that there is now more emphasis on the roles of all local authorities in supporting how ASF monies are spent at school and local authority levels. The Framework provided details on the expected role of the central local authority in setting the local strategic plans and aims, supporting schools and reflecting on schools’ plans in developing their improvement plans (including the SAC aspects of those) in a two-way process.

The Framework had a focus on planning processes and ensuring that there is strategic coherence in local authority areas. The role of headteachers to determine PEF activities in their school remained but this is “freedom within a framework”. Local authorities are expected to work with schools to develop annual ‘stretch aims’ on improving educational and health and wellbeing outcomes and closing the attainment gap.

The Framework states that the Scottish Government is “responsible for delivering the policy agenda of Ministers and supporting key partners to contribute to that.” Among other things, this involves: funding; collecting data; supporting and challenging areas where there is “limited progress”, and “collaborating across government and other partners to ensure a coherent and impactful policy landscape to support progress in both the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the national mission to tackle child poverty.”

Funding streams

Compared to the previous model, the key changes are the removal of the Challenge Authority and Challenge School programmes. The Strategic Equity Fund has replaced the Challenge Authority. Pupil Equity Funding remains. The funding for both SEF and PEF were set out up to 2025-26.

Pupil Equity Fund

PEF remained similar to the approach before 2022. PEF allocations are based on estimates of statutory eligibility for free school meals at a school level. Decision making on how to spend PEF lies at the school level. Schools are encouraged to use a variety of sources to determine how to spend PEF. Headteachers are expected to take account of the views of staff, pupils and the parent body in doing so. Schools should also evaluate and, if necessary, make changes to any interventions through PEF.

The Guidance for PEF was made more explicit that the work funded by PEF should be strategically aligned to local authority plans (and vice versa).

Strategic Equity Fund

The SEF replaced the Challenge Authority funding. Prior to 2022, the nine Challenge Authorities were identified on the basis of the density of SIMD20 neighbourhoods in the area. The funding itself was project funding to those eligible authorities – it was not allocated on a per capita basis. The Challenge Schools funding was available to schools outwith those nine authorities with the highest densities of pupils from SIMD20 areas.

The Scottish Government abandoned using SIMD as a measure to allocate ASF monies and has spread the challenge authority funding across all 32 local authorities. The SEF allocations are determined using the relative low income measurement of Children in Low Income Families data. By directly measuring household income at the individual level, CILIF provides data on the number of deprived children in each local authority.

There was a taper in the funding to 2025-26 which is intended to support the transition for 9 Challenge Authorities and to allow the other 23 local authorities to develop and scale up their approaches. Some of the challenge authorities have lost significant amounts of funding.

Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund

The scope of this fund is somewhat different to the other funding streams – it covers support for children and young people both before and after school-age. It is intended to support local authorities, as corporate parents, to support care experienced children and young people inside and outside of school.

As with other aspects of the ASF, local authorities should provide “end year reports submitted to the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, highlighting evidence of the impact on attainment alongside qualitative and, where available, quantitative information.”

National programmes

The ASF also supports a suite of national programmes, including investment in Education Scotland Attainment Advisor support for all 32 local authorities, in third sector partnerships, workforce development and the evaluation of the SAC programme itself.

Logic model

A '[logic model](#)' was presented along with the Framework and guidance on particular funding streams in the SAC. A logic model is “a visual planning tool that shows the journey from resources and activities to a programme’s intended outcome”. The logic model was designed to support a range of activities—

- Planning e.g. support development and monitoring of stretch aims, school improvement plans
- Communicating the Scottish Attainment Challenge Mission
- Promoting system wide understanding of short, medium and long term outcomes
- Collaboration and engagement with wider stakeholders on activities and the outcomes of the programme
- Forming the basis for evaluation
- Celebrating success

The SAC logic model sets out the inputs, activities and the short, medium and long-term outcomes from the programmes. There are four iterations of the logic model, the school/community Level, the local/regional level, the national level and the programme overall.

The Framework suggests that local authorities, school leaders and Education Scotland would “use available data and the Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model to explore a shared understanding of the local context, support setting of ambitious local authority stretch aims and monitoring performance and progress towards achieving these stretch aims”.