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Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund - Analysis of the Local Authority mini survey - Summer 2018

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

social research

Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund - Analysis of Local Authority Mini Survey – Summer 2018

Learning Analysis, Scottish Government.

Contents

Executive Summary

Background

E.1. This report summarises findings from the Local Authority mini survey, which took place during April-May 2018.

E.2. The survey invited views on the overall Attainment Scotland Fund. Specifically, all local authorities were asked around governance, sustainability, Pupil Equity Fund planning and support, and unintended consequences.

E.3. Overall 22 (out of 32) local authorities replied, including 9 challenge authorities and 13 non-challenge authorities. One response was asked for each authority but respondents could discuss the questions with colleagues before answering.

Key positives

E.4. The Attainment Scotland Fund continues to be a driver of change and cohesion. Authorities reported a greater focus on deprivation as a result of the funding.

E.5. Amongst most authorities, closing the poverty related attainment gap appears now to be embedded not just in those activities supported through the fund, but also through core education budgets and wider partnership agreements.

E.6. There is a general belief that this change in culture / ethos with a stronger focus on poverty and equity will maximise sustainability of improvements already achieved.

E.7. Generally, the planning and implementation of Pupil Equity Fund was positively reported by authorities. In particular, the one-to-one support provided to headteachers, the tailored guidance developed by some authorities and a focus on data and collaboration.

E.8. Overall, authorities praised the role of Attainment Advisors highly, stating that they were an “excellent source of support” providing “high quality and adequate challenge”.

Areas to consider

E.9. There were some concerns about a strong reliance on the funding to support staffing costs, and a belief that authorities would not be able to sustain this level of investment without the additional funding.

E.10. Concerns with staff recruitment, tight timescales and general issues with procurement continue to be ongoing challenges for most authorities.

E.11. Some authorities felt that the fund had created a sense of division between challenge and non-challenge authorities.

E.12. In some authorities, recruitment of Attainment Advisors was reported as challenging.

Methodological facts to note

Learning analysis sent a short online survey to local authorities to ask for their overall experience of the Attainment Scotland fund thus far.

Heads of education or project leads were invited to answer the survey. One response per authority was requested, but respondents were able to discuss their answers with colleagues before submitting a response.

Two waves of the survey have been undertaken so far:

- The **first wave** took place in May 2016. Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) had not yet been introduced. Therefore, only challenge authorities were asked to participate. A total of 6 out of the 7 participating challenge authorities of the time completed survey.
- The **second wave** was undertaken in April/May 2018. All local authorities were asked to participate. Overall, 22 (out of 32) local authorities responded to the survey. This included 9 (out of 9) challenge authorities and 13 (out of 23) other authorities.

The survey comprised questions around governance, funding, sustainability, PEF planning/ implementation and unintended consequences. Most questions had a free text box, to allow respondents to express their views in their own words.

In the first wave, the questionnaire focused on the Challenge Authority Programme. In the second wave, questions were broadened to cover the wider Scottish Attainment Challenge, hence including the Challenge Authority Programme, Schools programme and PEF.

This report contains findings from the second wave of the survey. It should be noted, that due to differences in type of respondent, questionnaire coverage and sample sizes, data is not comparable over time.

The aim of the analysis was to present the wide range of views offered. The responses were examined using a qualitative thematic approach and the key themes from the analysis are summarised in this report.

Survey findings

1. Governance

Local authorities were asked what they thought was working well and what could be improved in their experience of working with Education Scotland, Scottish Government and Attainment Advisors.

Education Scotland

Overall, local authorities (both challenge and non-challenge) voiced a very positive experience of their dealings with Education Scotland. The key highlights included:

- On-going, positive and constructive relationships with Area Lead Officers, Attainment Advisors, Improvement Advisors or Lead Inspectors.
- Praise for specific support provided, such as key documents, advice on data gathering or outcome focused evidence.
- The value of organised conferences and events, such as PEF conferences or the Scottish Learning Festival.

Some areas for further improvement were also highlighted. These included:

- A need for greater stability in the organisation.
- Clarifying responsibilities and their specific role.
- Clearer guidance on measuring impact. Specifically, some authorities suggested greater consistency in messages from Education Scotland and Scottish Government.
- Develop further opportunities for local authorities to collaborate – one local authority suggested utilising RICs to a greater extent.

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Challenge and non-challenge authorities had different views on what was working well and what could be improved in their dealings with Scottish Government.

- **Challenge authorities** praised in particular the support provided by policy colleagues which they found to be “helpful”, “supportive”, “appropriate and proportionate”. The reduction of reporting requirements and meeting schedules was also highly welcomed.

  However, they would prefer greater advance notice of submission deadlines.
- **Non-challenge authorities** stated that they had limited direct engagement with Scottish Government but that it was generally positive. They highlighted as positive the policy drive towards raising attainment and closing the poverty related attainment gap and found the communications clear and helpful.

Non-challenge authorities offered a range of ideas for further improvements, including:

- Development of a learning package from challenge authorities
- Streamlining of paperwork
- Consideration of other variables to allocate funding, e.g. rural poverty
- Ensuring events / sessions are undertaken outwith the Central Belt

Attainment Advisors

Overall, local authorities praised the role of Attainment Advisors highly. Both challenge and non-challenge authorities found them to be an “excellent source of support” providing “high quality and adequate challenge”.

Specifically, authorities valued the role of Attainment Advisors in:

- **Support**. For example for identifying appropriate interventions, organising interventions, delivering professional development, analysing data and self-evaluation.
- **Networks**. Attainment Advisors having and using their networks, and supporting networking of school or authority staff as well as linking this to national priorities.
- **Knowledge and experience.** The Attainment Advisor having good knowledge of local context, and being credible with everyone involved because of their experience in education.
- **Working relationship**. Having developed a productive and good working relationship with the Attainment Advisor.

In terms of areas for further improvement, authorities referred to some challenges encountered in recruiting an Attainment Advisor or finding a replacement for one. Non-challenge authorities, also suggested that the focus of Attainment Advisors should be on collaboration and ensuring the sharing of expertise more widely.

2. Funding

Local authorities were asked whether as a result of the fund, there had been any changes in how the local authority uses all its resources, including core education funding to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

Overall, 13 authorities (out of 22) said they had changed the way they used all their resources as a result of the fund.

When asked to explain how authorities have changed the way they use their resources, the following key themes emerge:

- **Deprivation as a focus**. Many authorities (challenge and non-challenge) said that as a result of the fund they were using all their resources with a clearer focus on deprivation and closing the poverty related attainment gap.
- **Greater joined-up working**. Some authorities (challenge and non-challenge) stated that there was greater joined-up working across services or that they now involve wider partners for service delivery.

Of the eight authorities who had not seen any change in the way they used all their resources, a wide range of reasons were given, each mentioned by one to two authorities:

- Changes in allocation of funding to improve outcomes for those disadvantaged would have happened anyway.
- There was already a focus on delivery excellence and equity.
- The funding went directly to schools (PEF) and as such funding formula at a local authority level was not altered.

3. Sustainability

Local authorities were asked whether they would expect the different improvements achieved as a result of the fund to be sustainable beyond the years of the fund.

Overall, there was a positive outlook in terms of sustainability, amongst both challenge and non-challenge authorities. Out of the 22 respondents, 13 believed improvements to be sustainable, three did not and six were unsure.

The key areas identified by authorities as drivers of sustainability were:

- A **change in culture / ethos / focus** – with authorities stating that there is now a wider and deeper understanding of the impact of poverty on attainment and a strong commitment to close the poverty related attainment gap
- Having a **clear focus on staff** capacity, leadership and training and development.
- **Changes in practice** and improvements in quality of learning of pupils

One challenge authority stated that they were linking key aspects of SAC projects with core authority provision and another challenge authority said they were working on an exit strategy. Another authority stated that while they had been very focused on building sustainability, “the withdrawal of such funding will undoubtedly have a negative impact”.

Amongst those who did not believe improvements to be sustainable (n=3), the reason given was that the biggest proportion of the fund was used to secure staff. One authority said that without the additional support local authority budgets would be unable to meet required staffing costs alone.

Concerns about a heavy reliance of the fund to secure staff, was also shared amongst some of those who believed improvements to be sustainable.

4. Pupil Equity Funding planning, implementation and support

Local authorities were asked what they thought worked well and what were the main barriers in the process of planning and implementing Pupil Equity Funding. Another question gathered what sort of support authorities provided to schools to aid in the implementation of the fund.

Highlights

Local authorities highlighted the following areas as working particularly well:

- **Targeted support to headteachers**. There appeared to be an emphasis on targeted support for headteachers driven by local authorities. This was highlighted as an area of success across both challenge (5 out of 9) and non-challenge (8 out of 13) authorities. Some authorities mentioned having a "strong sense of trust and confidence" with headteachers and "spending a lot of time talking to headteachers about how to use PEF".
- **Monitoring and data**. A focus on evidence and data was also mentioned by authorities as working particularly well in the process of planning and implementing PEF. There appeared to be a focus on monitoring impact of chosen interventions, plans and/or outcomes.
- **Sharing learning**. This was mentioned mostly in relation to SAC authorities or schools sharing learning and experiences with those newer to the funding. This sharing of learning was valued both by challenge and non-challenge authorities.
- **Collaboration**. Authorities mentioned how they encouraged collaboration across schools and some referred to a "collegiate approach with some schools working together as a cluster to raise attainment".
- **Guidance**. Non-challenge authorities in particular highlighted the development of guidance on the use of PEF to support schools in their planning and implementation of PEF. For example, one authority stated that they "had clear guidance for all schools in terms of HR and procurement and gathered a wide range of partner providers and shared their offer with schools".

Barriers

There were three key barriers identified across challenge and non-challenge authorities. These were, in order of mentions:

- **Staffing**. Many authorities (5 out of 9 challenge and 10 out of 13 non-challenge authorities) mentioned concerns around staffing. This included issues with shortage of staff or challenges in organising staff covers and absences.
- **Timescales**. Some authorities found the funding too rushed, with limited time to plan ahead and implement activities.
- **Procurement**. General issues with procurement were also raised by some authorities.

Support provided to schools

Local authorities were asked to describe the level and nature of the support they had provided to schools in their local authority to aid their implementation of PEF.

All authorities had provided some sort of support to their schools. The type of support provided varied across authorities. However, the three most common support mechanisms were, in order of frequency of mentions:

- General guidance on strategies, plans and/or spend.
- One to one meetings with headteachers.
- Support on evaluation and/or data.

A few authorities also provided support on monitoring spend or how to manage a financial budget.

Non-challenge authorities in particular mentioned how Quality Improvement Officers had been providing support and challenge in relation to PEF funding.

5. Unintended consequences

Authorities were asked what, if any, were the unintended positive and negative consequences of taking part in the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Unintended positive consequences

Overall, 16 out of the 22 authorities mentioned unintended positive consequences. The key themes emerging related to:

- **Collaboration**. Though some highlighted that an increase in collaboration was not necessarily unintended, many authorities described an "increase in schools working together and sharing practice" as "brilliant".
- **Greater focus on deprivation**. Some highlighted a culture change across the authority with a greater emphasis and awareness of the impact of deprivation on attainment.

Unintended negative consequences

Overall, 14 out of the 22 authorities mentioned unintended negative consequences. The key themes emerging related to:

- **Recruitment issues**. A number of respondents talked about difficulties in securing staff. Non-challenge authorities in particular stated that the Scottish Attainment Challenge had "taken a lot of staff" and the "pool of available staff was smaller".
- **A sense of division**. A couple of challenge authorities stated that some schools felt "left out" if they were not identified as a focus schools. Two non-challenge authorities referred to a sense of division between local authorities with and without the Challenge Authorities programme.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

☐ are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics

☐ are available via an alternative route <specify or delete this text>

☒ may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact < socialresearch@gov.scot> for further information.

☐ cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

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