

# **2021 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan**

## **Summary Document**

**December 2020**

# Summary of the 2021 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan

## Introduction

The 2021 National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Improvement Plan sets out the vision and priorities for Scottish education that have been agreed across the system, and the national improvement activity that needs to be undertaken to help deliver those key priorities. It complements ongoing implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW); the three supporting pillars of Scottish education.

In March 2020, three months after we had set out the priority improvement activities in the 2020 NIF and Improvement Plan, school buildings closed as a result of COVID-19. We had to place recovery and support to the education system at the heart of all our activities.

The review of the NIF in Autumn 2020 produced a clear consensus that broad stability in the priorities and drivers of improvement was desirable. Equally, it is important to ensure that the NIF reflects changing priorities as a result of COVID-19. A number of issues were raised during the review, including the need to focus on recovery, on providing certainty in a world where very little feels secure, and supporting those who need it most. There was also support for an increased focus on supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people, and of staff, in the light of COVID-19. There should also be more emphasis placed on the needs of children and young people with additional support needs.

## Our vision for education in Scotland

- **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 the 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.

## Key priorities of the National Improvement Framework

- 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

## The response of the Scottish education system to COVID-19

The Scottish education system has responded collectively to mitigate the worst impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people across Scotland. The key principles of that response can be characterised as follows:

- **Partnership and collaboration** – as exemplified by the quick, local response to setting up childcare hubs, and the ongoing work of the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group.

- **Data and evidence led** – including drawing on the multi-disciplinary advice of the Scientific Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children’s Issues
- **Agility and flexibility** – being quick to respond to rapidly-changing circumstances and evolving evidence
- **A priority on equity** – including via the initial childcare hubs, investment in digital devices, and ongoing provision of free school meals

Since March 2020 we have, at all levels of the system, had to find new and innovative ways to continue the business of learning and teaching. The immediate priority became the need to ensure support was provided quickly to the most vulnerable children and families, many of whom relied on schools to provide a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment.

The strong leadership and effective collaboration we have in Scottish education, laid a foundation for co-operation across Scotland. Food parcels and essential learning resources, including electronic devices and stationery, were delivered to those who needed them most, and staff worked to ensure ongoing provision of free school meals. Local authority teams quickly established childcare hubs for vulnerable children, and those of key workers, which ran throughout the summer term and the school holidays.

#### COVID-19 Education Recovery Group

The Scottish Government established the [COVID-19 Education Recovery Group](#) (CERG) to bring together key stakeholders and decision makers from across the Scottish education system. Working with CERG, the Scottish Government published a strategic framework for the reopening of schools, based on the consensus view at the time that physical distancing and enhanced mitigations in schools were going to be a necessity for some considerable time to come.

It was initially proposed that schools reopen in August on a “blended learning” basis, with young people being taught some of the time in school and some at home. Following a sustained downward trend in COVID-19 in Scotland it became possible to plan for pupils to return to school full time in August. This was considered to be the best possible outcome given the impact that school closure had on children and young people, particularly those from a disadvantaged background. The blended learning models remain an essential contingency in the event that specific schools require either to close, or to implement remote learning, for a defined period of time.

#### Recovery and continuity

In recognition of the need for more granular scientific advice on education and children’s issues, the Scottish Government established a sub-group of the main COVID-19 Advisory Group. [The Scientific Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children’s Issues](#) has produced a suite of advice which informed the development of [guidance](#) to support a safe return to school in August. Guidance for schools has been updated on a regular basis to support the continuing safe implementation of a full-time return to school, and to reflect the new levels approach within [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Scotland's Strategic Framework](#). It takes full account of the evolving COVID-19 situation in Scotland, the experience of reopening schools to date, the advice received from scientific and public health experts, and the advice of CERG and other key stakeholders including children and young people.

Ministers remain committed to facilitating greater school-based decision making, and will engage with this again, once there is collective agreement that the system has sufficient capacity. A key part of this will be reflecting on what has been learned during the pandemic, and considering how key issues can be managed in an empowered and resilient system going forward.

Effective leadership has been, and will continue to be, fundamental to recovery. It is also important that education recovery is not seen as simply aiming to return Scottish education to the way it was before the pandemic hit. Scotland's response to the pandemic has highlighted the importance of creating a more flexible and resilient system, which operates as well in a crisis as it does under normal circumstances.

The focus on education recovery support, and building a more resilient system, is reflected throughout the improvement activities in this NIF and Improvement Plan.

### **Education recovery in 2020/21**

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Scottish Government has placed protecting the interests of children and young people at the heart of our response. Schools remaining safe, open and welcoming – with a focus on health, wellbeing and intensified support for reducing inequity and enabling the highest quality of learning and teaching – has been a critical component of that priority. We know lockdown has been particularly difficult for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the equity audit which will be published later in December will provide more detail on those issues. Education remains, by far, the most effective means we have to improve the life chances of all of our young people.

#### Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs)

Prior to COVID-19, there was gathering momentum around collaboration within and across the 6 RICs. This was supported by the regional teams within Education Scotland, with more frequent information-sharing, and data driven discussions around improvement. The latest RIC improvement plans take account of the ongoing challenges of COVID-19 and, as a result, have a strong focus on educational recovery and renewal, as well as support for the developing national e-learning offer.

#### Education Scotland

Education Scotland has reviewed its [corporate plan](#) with a clear aim to support “*recovery, quality, and improvement in Scottish education and thereby securing the delivery of better learning experiences, and excellence and equity, for Scottish learners.*” Education Scotland's work in session 2020/21 will address four priorities:

- System leadership
- Collaboration
- Education support and improvement
- Professional learning

The health and wellbeing of school staff is key to addressing all of those priorities and Education Scotland will work with key partners to pilot and evaluate a package of support focused on educator wellbeing. In addition, Education Scotland continues to provide

mental health and wellbeing [learning and teaching resources for teachers](#) to meet the needs of all children and young people.

Professional learning will largely be delivered online, which has proven successful, but plans are in place to re-introduce some face-to-face learning when it is safe. Education Scotland will continue to work in partnership with local authorities and RICs to ensure the support offered at all levels of the system is meeting the needs within the current context and beyond.

#### National e-learning offer

Although schools are open, we are continuing to develop support for remote learning, including through [Glow, Scotland Learns](#) and the [National e-learning Offer](#). The Offer, which has been developed in partnership with Education Scotland, e-Sgoil, ADES and RICs, complements the online learning being provided by schools, local authorities and RICs across Scotland and covers the key themes of “live” (i.e. provision of live, synchronised learning and teaching), “recorded” (provision of recorded lesson content) “supported” (online learning and teaching resources), and associated professional development support for practitioners. The National e-learning Partnership will continue across all four aspects.

#### Digital Inclusion

Lockdown also demonstrated that access to technology is essential to securing excellence and equity in education. The Scottish Government is investing £25m to support digital inclusion amongst disadvantaged children and young people. Funding allocations for digital devices and connectivity solutions have been made to all 32 local authorities for them to secure connection packages and laptops/devices to meet local need. At end-November 2020, almost 50,000 devices and over 9,000 connectivity solutions had been distributed to learners across Scotland. In total, the programme will benefit up to 70,000 disadvantaged children and young people.

#### National Improvement Hub

Education Scotland has collected examples of effective school practice and published them on the [National Improvement Hub](#) to celebrate the work of staff in ensuring children and young people enjoy high-quality learning experiences.

#### SQA support for assessment in 2020/21

[Professor Priestley’s Review of the National Qualifications 2020 experience and the report’s recommendations](#), helped inform the approach to assessment and certification for 2020/21. Furthermore, Unavoidable COVID-19 related disruption to learning means that it is impossible to guarantee that all learners will be in a position to have the best chance of performing to their true potential in exams in 2021. As a result the Deputy First Minister has announced that National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher exams would not go ahead in 2021.

The measures being put in place for 2020-21 are: that National 5, Highers and Advanced Highers will be awarded based on an alternative assessment model, not the usual exam.

SQA will reflect on the findings of the Priestley review, as well as its own lessons learned from awarding in 2020 as it delivers the arrangements for 2021. SQA is also reviewing its appeals process to ensure it aligns with the UNCRC, including consultation with relevant stakeholders, including young people.

### Mental health and wellbeing

The impact of covid-19 and school closure on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is a key focus of educational recovery. A range of resources are available to school staff to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

A Mental Health In Schools working group has been established to support the ongoing commitment to supporting positive mental health in children and young people in school. A contractor has been appointed to develop an online, open access Professional Learning Resource in mental health and wellbeing for all primary and secondary school staff.

### Improving the voice of young people

Children and young people's experiences and opinions of the impact of COVID-19 are a vital aspect of the recovery process. Young Scot is in the process of establishing an Education Recovery Youth Panel, as a successor to the successful Scottish Learner Panel project, made up of around 25 learners from across Scotland, aged 9-18. Together with the learner engagement strategy being developed by the SQA, all of these activities will ensure the rights and needs of young people are at the heart of the next steps in education recovery.

### **Delivering improvement**

The primary purpose of the NIF is to bring together enhanced information and data at all levels of the system, to drive improvement activity across Scotland. COVID-19 has, however, had an impact on some of the data that informs the NIF. In particular, it was decided not to collect Achievement of CfE level (ACEL) data for 2019/20.

Notwithstanding this, we know that more needs to be done to continue to improve outcomes for all our children and young people. At national level, this Improvement Plan summarises the key evidence and identifies new improvement activity under the six drivers of improvement:

- School Leadership
- Teacher Professionalism
- Parental Engagement
- Assessment of children's progress
- School Improvement
- Performance information

### **A curriculum that provides the skills and attributes needed in a rapidly changing world**

The purpose of CfE is to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and experiences to prepare them for their life beyond school and the best possible opportunity to fulfil their potential. CfE, its four capacities, its principles and its values is the foundation for high

quality learning, teaching, and assessment. It is essential that the curriculum supports our children and young people to develop fully in school, to achieve positive destinations and to be provided with the full range of skills, attributes and capacities to be resilient within a rapidly changing world.

A range of indicators demonstrate important strengths within the curriculum:

### **School leaver data**

- 92.9% of 2018/19 school leavers were in work, training or study within nine months of leaving school, down from a record 93.3% in 2017/18;
- the proportion of 2018/19 school leavers unemployed nine months after leaving school was 5.8%, down from 13.1% in 2009/10;
- the gap between those from the most and least deprived communities within nine months of leaving school in work, education or training – a positive destination – has reduced from 18.7 percentage points in 2009/10 to 8.4 percentage points in 2018/19;
- 38.4% of school leavers in 2018/19 were in Higher Education nine months after leaving school;
- the number of school leavers attaining vocational qualifications at Level 5 and above increased from 7.3% in 2013/14 to 17.1% in 2018/19;
- the percentage of school leavers attaining one or more passes at SCQF Level 6 (Higher) or better is up from 50.4% in 2009/10 to 60.5% in 2018/19; and
- the percentage of school leavers attaining one or more passes at SCQF Level 5 (National 5) or better is up from 77.1% in 2009/10 to 85.1% in 2018/19.

### **OECD Review of Curriculum for Excellence**

The Scottish Government has commissioned the OECD to undertake an independent review of CfE. The original [remit for the review](#) was published in February 2020.

The Review will look at the Senior Phase curriculum and the Broad General Education and the articulation between the two. It will help us to better understand the choices young people are getting across the country.

#### Additional work on assessment and qualifications

In response to the 2020 SQA exam results, the Deputy First Minister asked the OECD to expand the work on the CfE Review to also include a deeper focus on the future of student assessment and qualifications approaches in Scotland. The aim is to analyse Scotland's approach to student assessment and qualifications and produce options for enhancements, informed by international good practice.

This work will be aligned with the OECD Review of CfE. The final comparative paper will be published later in summer 2021, following publication of the CfE Review in June 2021.

### **Measuring the attainment gap**

Closing the poverty related attainment gap remains a top priority for this government.

In the 2018 NIF and Improvement Plan, we identified 11 key measures to assess progress, and a further 15 sub-measures that reflect the key stages of the learner journey and the breadth of issues that can impact on attainment.

We do not have complete data for 5 of the 11 key measures. We could not collect comparable ACEL data this year due to COVID-19. In addition, there has been a change to the domains assessed for the 27-30 month review, which means that the stretch aim that was set for that measure is no longer appropriate.

The latest evidence demonstrates general improvements in the percentage of 16-19 year olds participating in education, training and employment, and in the percentage of primary and secondary pupils achieving relevant CfE levels in both literacy and numeracy. However, the picture is more mixed for the percentage of pupils leaving schools with 1 or more qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6.

On the health and wellbeing measures, the gap between those in the most or least deprived areas having no concerns identified at their 27-30 month review has remained constant, as it has for children and young people aged 4-12 years, and 13 and 15 year olds, in their total difficulties score.

We are also using [stretch aims](#) for each of the 11 key measures to assist the development and implementation of the most appropriate improvement activities to secure educational improvement for all children and young people. The stretch aims are deliberately designed to be a challenging ambition to which those who are delivering improvement can aspire. They are not targets. At the moment, some progress is being made, but none of the measures are narrowing to the extent set by the stretch aims.

More detailed data is provided in the full NIF and Improvement Plan, while the 15 sub-measures can be seen in the [NIF Interactive Evidence Report](#).

### **Next steps on closing the attainment gap**

A range of action is underway in response to COVID-19 to help close the attainment gap, including:

- Increased **support for families to engage with learning at home**, including via Glow and a range of new national digital learning resources.
- **£80m of additional investment in education staff**, sufficient for the recruitment of around 1,400 additional teachers and 200 support staff.
- Additional **flexibility to redirect Attainment Scotland Funding** to help mitigate the impacts of school closures on our most disadvantaged families, and to make adjustments to existing plans to be delivered as schools return.
- For the first time, **Pupil Equity Fund allocations were confirmed for two years** (£250m in 2020/21 and 2021/22), benefitting 97% of schools and giving headteachers assistance in their planning and decision making. This takes total investment in the Scottish Attainment Challenge over £750m over the last five years and extends the programme for a further year providing invaluable long-term commitment.
- A further £10m has been made available so councils can **continue providing free school meals through the winter breaks** with future funding confirmed to extend support over Easter.



- £30m as part of a huge digital boost through provision of laptops for disadvantaged children and young people, which includes **£25m to enable a rollout of digital devices to school pupils to enable them to study online.**

Guidance has also been produced by CERG to **support teachers and other professional practitioners in preparing the curriculum offer for the recovery phase**, with an emphasis on prioritising the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, practitioners and families. CERG will continue to review and update key guidance for schools, including guidance on ensuring continuity in learning and on the curriculum during the recovery period.

COVID-19 has also reinforced the vital role played by community learning and development in supporting young people and families - a role that will become ever more important in our recovery. We have provided **£3m to a new Youth Work for Education Recovery Fund**, supporting young people to engage with youth work activities that build their confidence and skills, support their health and well-being, and address the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Equity Audit has been developed through a comprehensive literature review plus engagement with headteachers, practitioners and support staff, parents and young people. It will deepen our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as improve our awareness of the key drivers behind this and local insight on: health and wellbeing; educational experiences; educational attainment and the factors which mitigate against negative impacts.

As per the 2020 Programme for Government we will also publish further evidence of progress made by March 2021, including analysis of the learning from the first five years of the Attainment Challenge. This will include a detailed review by Education Scotland of the practicalities of the Attainment Challenge at local authority level.

Drawing upon this suite of evidence, the Scottish Government will work with partners, including our International Council of Education Advisors, to design the best approach to accelerating progress through the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

## **Conclusion**

This year, COVID-19 has had an unavoidable impact on the NIF and Improvement Plan. Although we are still striving to gain a deeper understanding of our educational strengths and weaknesses, and to use that information to drive improvement, our primary focus for the next year is one of recovery and support.

The 2021 NIF and Improvement Plan may have fewer new actions than in previous years, but those actions are clearly focused on supporting the education system to recover from the impact that the pandemic has had on all levels of the system, from staff and students, to parents, carers and the wider community.

Over this past year, Scottish education has embodied the values of CfE and has pulled together to shoulder the collective responsibility for looking after the health, wellbeing and achievement of every child in Scotland. The actions set out in this Plan will help support the system to work together and continue to develop the skills, judgement and creativity required to build a stronger and more resilient education system.



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