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Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation: Headteacher Survey - Full Report 2020

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

social research

Headteacher Survey 2020 Research Report

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Executive Summary

This report presents key findings from the fifth survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) support, covering the 2019/20 academic year including the period of school building closures from March to June 2020. The survey was issued to all schools in receipt of Challenge Authority (CA) or Schools Programme (SP) funding, and 50% of those in receipt of only Pupil Equity Funding (PEF).

Of headteachers who responded to the survey:

A large majority (90%) have seen improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap - and 88% expect further improvement over the next few years.

Around a third (34%) expect their progress to be sustainable beyond funding, and most (58%) felt that the focus on equity would be sustainable.

The great majority (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Headteachers were most likely to have seen progress where there has been a change of ethos, improved understanding of barriers for pupils and families, strong use of data, and engagement with families/communities.

Most schools (75%) have seen new circumstances or needs emerge since school building closures. Additional flexibility in ASF funding has been used by 57% to develop approaches and establish new collaborations.

Headteachers felt they had autonomy to plan for their school's needs (95%), and that PEF provided additional resource to support their school (89%).

Despite adapting approaches to remote learning, schools saw a lack of in-person contact as a key challenge for pupil engagement during school building closures. Supporting pupil/family wellbeing in the face of increasing support needs was also a significant challenge for some schools.

Engagement with pupils and families underpinned the response to school building closures for many schools. Pupil/family engagement also supported other aspects of schools' response including a focus on pupil/family wellbeing, maintaining a shared ethos, and supporting remote learning.

Factors such as communication with pupils/families, understanding of pupil/family needs, and a shared ethos emerged as particularly important during school building closures, but responses suggest that these will continue to inform schools' work to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

A total of 420 responses were received, equating to a 27% response rate. This is lower than the response achieved to the 2019 survey, although it should be noted that fieldwork took place in early 2021 during a period of school building closures and associated pressure on school resources. Nevertheless, the volume of responses is sufficient to produce robust results, and survey data has been weighted to minimise the impact of any response bias.

Findings, based on headteachers who responded to the survey, are summarised below in relation to the main survey themes in turn.

ASF and supported approaches

A great majority of headteachers (98%) felt they understood the challenges faced by pupils affected by poverty. A large majority (84%) felt that the approach to achieving equity was embedded within their school.

Most schools (75%) have seen new circumstances or needs emerge since school building closures. These most commonly relate to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income and employment, on pupil/parent health and wellbeing, and on the ability of pupils to engage with remote learning.

A large majority of schools (85%) had developed their approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap from the previous year. In addition, 46% developed their approach further during school building closures and 57% made use of additional flexibility in use of ASF funds introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, school building closures involved multiple changes to their approach. These typically related to supporting pupils and families to adapt to remote learning (including provision of digital resources), supporting families' mental health and wellbeing, and responding to increasing numbers affected by poverty.

A large majority of schools (85%) had engaged with families and communities as part of their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and most (81%) had further developed their engagement approach during school building closures. This typically focused on more use of 'outreach' communication with families such as regular 'check in' and improving understanding of circumstances and needs.

Use of data and evaluation

A large majority of headteachers were positive about their use of data and evidence in developing approaches (84%) and measuring impact (82%). Most were also positive about use of evidence to measure impact (76%) and measuring progress (78%). However, there has been a decline since 2019 in headteachers' rating of their use of data to develop approaches, and measure impact.

Impact

A large majority (90%) of headteachers have seen improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap as a result of ASF-supported approaches (12-point increase since 2017). A similar number (88%) expected to see further improvement in closing the gap over the next few years, although this represents a 10-point reduction since 2019.

The great majority (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap (61% had seen a 'significant impact'). Secondary schools and those with middle to higher PEF allocations were most likely to feel that their progress had been significantly affected.

Analysis indicates that headteachers are most likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap where there has been changes of culture or ethos (such as embedding approaches to ensuring equity or improved collaborative working), improved understanding of barriers faced by pupils and families, strong skills and knowledge in use of data and evidence, and engagement with families and communities.

Nearly two thirds (63%) of headteachers expected progress to date and/or the focus on equity to be sustainable beyond funding. Headteachers were more positive about sustainability of focus than of progress to date; 34% expected progress to be sustainable, and 58% expected the focus on equity to be sustainable (the latter a 17-point increase since 2019). Those who expected progress to be sustainable pointed to staff skills and capacity developed through ASF-supported approaches as being sustainable beyond funding, even if the approaches themselves do not continue in their current form.

Nearly two thirds (65%) of headteachers had seen an increase in collaborative working up to March 2020 as a result of ASF support. Nearly half (46%) had seen a further increase in collaborative working during school building closures. Headteachers also reported new collaborations having emerged during school building closures, most commonly with third sector and public sector agencies.

Pupil Equity Funding

The majority (76%) of headteachers felt there was sufficient support in place to develop and implement their school plan for PEF, a 20-point increase since 2017.

The great majority (94%) of headteachers felt they had the autonomy to develop PEF plans that responded to local context and needs. Views were also highly positive on whether PEF had provided additional resources to help schools address the poverty-related attainment gap (89% felt this had been the case).

Learning from school building closures

A lack of face-to-face pupil contact was the most commonly cited challenge for schools during school building closures. Despite adapting their approach to remote learning, some saw a lack of in-person contact as a continuing barrier to engagement – in terms of delivering the curriculum and maintaining targeted interventions and pastoral care. Supporting pupil and family wellbeing was also highlighted as a challenge, with some schools having struggled to respond to increasing mental health needs in particular. This included reference to teachers being required to respond to an increasing volume of support requests while access to specialist support services was limited during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Approaches to maintain communication and build relationships with pupils and families underpinned the response to these challenges for a number of schools. This was mentioned by nearly half of respondents, with some noting that they had dedicated considerable resources to maintaining regular communication with pupils and families. Responses indicate that this focus on engagement also supported other aspects of schools' response to school building closures, by facilitating support to pupil and family wellbeing, and maintaining a shared ethos across the school community. Schools also highlighted the important role played by school staff as their approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap developed during school building closures. This included particular reference to the commitment of staff in the context of what was for some a significant change in role as more pupils and families turned to schools for information and support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cross-cutting themes

A number of key themes emerged across the survey which appear to have an important bearing on respondents' work to close the poverty-related attainment gap. For example, those most likely to report improvement:

- had **embedded approaches to equity** across the school community;
- **understand challenges** faced by pupils/parents affected by poverty;
- felt **staff data skills** have developed through effective use of ASF;
- have seen **more collaborative working**; and
- felt they **are effective in measuring progress and impact**.

Several wider themes also appear to have influenced experience of the ASF, and how schools responded to the challenges of COVID-19:

- **maintaining communication** with pupils and families;
- **better understanding of challenges affecting** pupils and families including an increasing focus on **wellbeing and mental health**; and
- ensuring a **shared ethos** across the school community.

While these themes were highlighted in the unique context of COVID-19, responses indicate that they will continue to inform work to achieve equity.

1. Introduction

1.1. This report provides an overview of headline findings from the 2020 survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of support from the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The survey was commissioned by Scottish Government's Learning Analysis Unit to inform the wider evaluation of the ASF.

1.2. A shorter Topline Findings Briefing Report was published earlier in 2021, alongside *Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: fourth interim report* and *Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: progress report 2016 to 2021*.

Background

1.3. Launched in 2015, the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) is supported by the £750million Attainment Scotland Fund with the strategic aim of closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities.

1.4. The Scottish Attainment Challenge and the ASF have developed and expanded since 2015, to include more children and young people, schools and local authorities. The ASF currently incorporates the following funding streams:

- **Pupil Equity Funding (PEF)** provides funds directly to schools for headteachers to use at their discretion on initiatives that they consider will help close the poverty related attainment gap. Over 97% of schools in Scotland have been allocated funding, based on the estimated numbers of pupils in Primary 1 to Secondary 3 registered for free school meals.
- **The Challenge Authority (CA) and Schools Programmes (SP)** provide additional resource to nine local authorities, and 73 schools out with those local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation. Each Challenge Authority/Schools Programme school receives funding and support to deliver improvement plans focused on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing to tackle the poverty related attainment gap.
- **Care Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP)** funding for targeted initiatives, activities, and resources, designed to improve the educational outcomes of this group.

1.5. As the Scottish Attainment Challenge has evolved, the focus of the evidence being collected through the Headteacher Survey has moved from primarily being about processes towards a greater focus on progress and impact of approaches being delivered. This evidence is helping to inform the progress being made towards delivering the long-term outcomes of the programme.

Study objectives

1.6. The ASF Headteacher survey is an annual Scottish Government commissioned survey which includes headteachers of schools in receipt of Challenge Authority, Schools Programme and/or Pupil Equity Funding. The overall aim for the 2020 survey was to build on learning from previous surveys to further improve operation of the ASF, and to maximise the impact of programmes supported by the Fund. This included the following specific objectives:

- Provide insight on the experience of headteachers benefiting through each of the ASF streams, identifying any variation in experience or views across schools;
- Build on longitudinal data to monitor changes over time; and
- Provide evidence of what is working and what is not working well to inform ongoing delivery of the ASF.

2. Methodology

2.1. This section summarises the survey fieldwork approach, and the level and profile of response.

Survey design and fieldwork

2.2. This is the fifth survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of ASF support and cove red the 2019/20 academic year. Surveys in 2016 and 2017 included headteachers across the Challenge Authorities and Schools Programmes, with a sample of PEF-only schools included for the first time in the 2018 survey. The survey sample was expanded for the 2019 survey to include all schools in receipt of CA, SP and/or PEF support.

2.3. The present survey coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, with fieldwork conducted in January and February 2021 during a period of school building closures and increased remote learning. The survey sample was therefore reduced to limit the burden on schools affected by the pandemic and school building closures. All CA and SP schools, and 50% of schools in receipt of PEF only were invited to participate. The survey methodology otherwise remained consistent with that used in previous surveys.

2.4. The survey sought headteacher views and experiences relating to the 2019/20 academic year. Survey content was adapted from that used in the 2019 survey. Key indicators were maintained where survey findings are used to track trends over time, alongside the introduction of new questions looking specifically at schools' experience of ASF during the first period of school building closures from March to June 2020. The survey design kept a close focus on key questions which can inform the ongoing ASF evaluation, to limit survey completion time and the associated burden on schools.

2.5. The profile of schools across the three ASF streams and urban/rural geography[1] is summarised below.

[1] Urban/rural classification of schools was adapted from the 6-fold classification published by the Scottish Government, based on the location of the school building.

Table 1: Survey population by ASF stream

Urban/Rural area	Challenge Authority	Schools Programme	PEF-only	All
Urban area	525	49	392	966 (60%)
Small town	47	8	113	168 (10%)
Rural area	61	8	341	410 (25%)
Unknown	25	8	38	71 (4%)
Total	658 (41%)	73 (5%)	884 (55%)	1,615

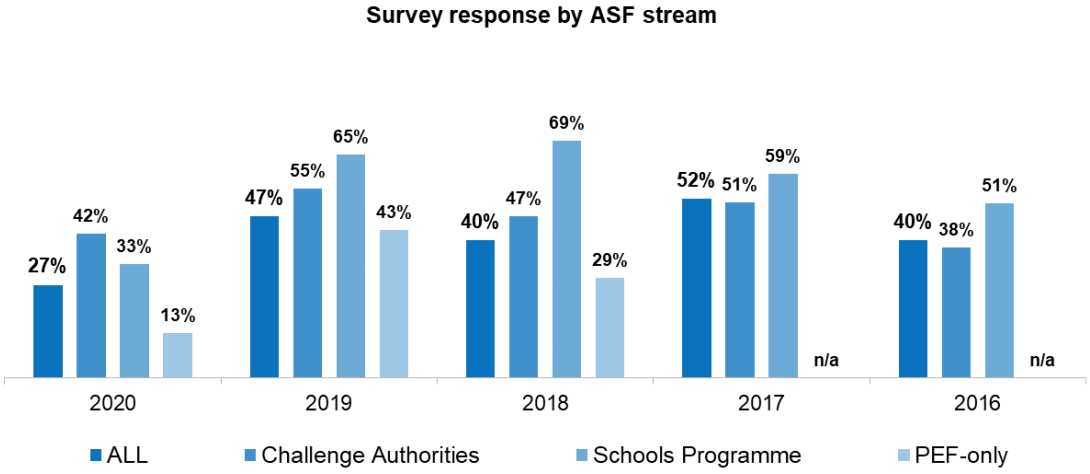
Note: 'Unknown' urban/rural location is recorded where school postcode information could not be matched to geocoding data.

2.6. Consistent with previous surveys, survey invites were issued directly to schools, supported by promotion via Education Scotland and local authorities. The survey was issued in January 2021 and the fieldwork period extended to enable the broadest possible response, running to mid-February 2021. The survey response and approach to survey weighting is summarised over the following pages, with further detail provided in the Technical Report included in the Supporting Documents.

Survey response

2.7. A total of 420 responses were received by survey close, equivalent to an overall response rate of 27%. This represents a 20-point decrease in survey response since 2019, primarily due to a 30-point decrease in response from PEF-only schools (13% compared to 43% in 2019 – see Figure 1 over the page). As noted above, survey fieldwork took place in early 2021 during a period of school building closures, and associated increase in pressure on school resources. In this context, we very much appreciate those schools able to participate. Moreover, the volume of response is sufficient to produce robust statistical results to inform the wider ASF evaluation.

Figure 1: Survey response 2016 to 2020



2.8. The table below summarises the profile of survey respondents and compares this with all schools in receipt of ASF support. In terms of the profile of respondents, the largest groups are Challenge Authority schools, primary schools, schools in urban areas, and schools with a middle or upper PEF allocation. This differs from the profile of all ASF-supported schools on a number of indicators, in part due to the change in sampling approach for the present survey:

- Challenge Authority schools are over-represented by survey respondents, and PEF-only schools under-represented. This is due to the 50% sample taken of PEF-only schools (compared to the 100% sample of CA schools), compounded by a lower response rate from PEF-only schools. Survey weighting has been used to correct for this response bias.
- Schools with lower PEF allocations are under-represented, and those with higher allocations are over-represented. This is also in part due to the under-representation of PEF-only schools (which typically have lower PEF allocations) and over-representation of CA schools (which typically have higher PEF allocations because of the higher concentration of deprivation in their community resulting in higher numbers of pupils registered for free school meals).
- Schools in rural areas are under-represented, and schools in urban areas over-represented. Again, survey weighting has been used to correct for this.

Table 2: Profile of survey respondents

Attainment Scotland Fund	Respondents (n=420)	All schools in receipt of ASF	Differential
Challenge Authorities	58%	27%	31%
Schools' Programme	11%	3%	8%
PEF-only	31%	67%	-36%
PEF allocation[2]	**Respondents (n=420)**	**All schools in receipt of ASF**	**Differential**
Lower	10%	22%	-12%
Middle	43%	42%	0%
Higher	40%	21%	19%
Unknown	7%	14%	-
School sector	**Respondents (n=420)**	**All schools in receipt of ASF**	**Differential**
Primary schools	80%	80%	-1%
Secondary schools	15%	15%	1%
Special schools	5%	5%	0%
Unknown	0%	0%	-
Urban/rural location	**Respondents (n=420)**	**All schools in receipt of ASF**	**Differential**
Urban	64%	49%	15%
Small town	10%	10%	-1%
Rural	15%	33%	-18%
Unknown	11%	7%	-

Analysis and reporting

2.9. Survey responses have been weighted by ASF stream and urban/rural location to adjust for response bias; all results presented in the remainder of this report are weighted. Base numbers for each survey question vary due to question non-response – i.e. the results exclude non-respondents to the question unless stated otherwise.

[2] 'Lower', 'middle' and 'higher' ranges of PEF allocation are based, respectively, on the lower 25% of schools, middle 50% of schools, and upper 25% of schools in terms of PEF allocation in 2019/20.

2.10. Survey analysis has used hypothesis tests with a 5% significance level to identify significant differences from previous survey findings, and across key respondent groups. These included:

- ASF stream;
- PEF allocation;
- School sector; and
- Urban/rural location.

2.11. Where variation across these groups is noted in the body of the survey report, this is based on a statistically significant difference between groups.

2.12. Survey data showed some inconsistency between responses and data on ASF support provided to schools - for example, 28 Challenge Authority respondents indicated that their school received only Pupil Equity Funding. The categorisation of respondents used in our analysis has been based on Scottish Government records rather than self-reporting.

2.13. The survey included a number of questions giving headteachers the opportunity to respond in their own words. This feedback has been coded into broad themes, and the results presented in the survey report. This includes the percentage of respondents coded into each theme – note that these percentages are based on those answering the question, and respondents can be assigned to multiple themes. Presentation of written feedback also includes direct quotes - this material has been edited for brevity and to ensure anonymity.

2.14. A full list of survey questions, tabular survey results and follow-up pro forma are provided in the associated Technical Report included in the Supporting Documents for this report and available at http://www.gov.scot/ISBN/9781802010114

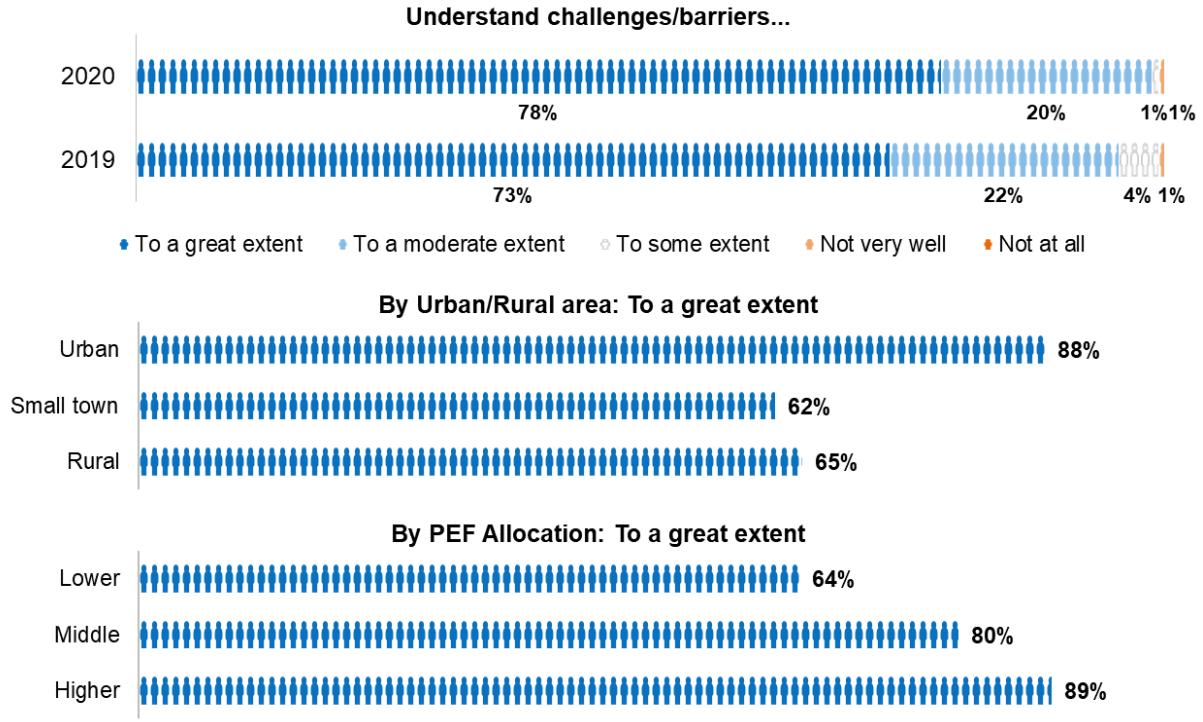
3. ASF and supported approaches

3.1. This section summarises survey findings on respondents' experiences in developing their approach, including schools' focus in achieving equity, and engagement with families and communities.

Developing schools' approach

3.2. A great majority of headteachers felt they understood the challenges and barriers faced by pupils affected by poverty; 98%, including 78% who felt they understood this 'to a great extent'. This is similar to 2019 survey results and was also consistent across ASF streams. However, those in small town and rural areas, and those with lower PEF allocations were less likely to feel that they understood these challenges.

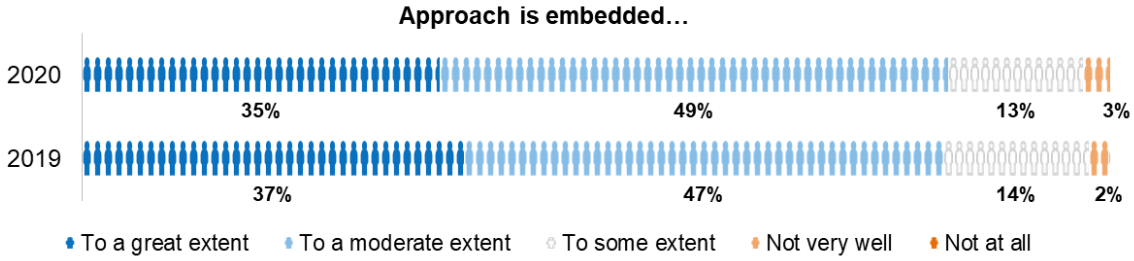
Figure 2: Understanding of challenges/barriers faced by pupils affected by poverty in your school



3.3. A large majority of headteachers felt that the approach to achieving equity in education is embedded within their school community; 84% felt that their approach was embedded within their school community to a great or moderate extent. Only 3% felt their approach was not very well embedded.

3.4. These findings are similar to 2019 survey results and were broadly consistent across key respondent groups.

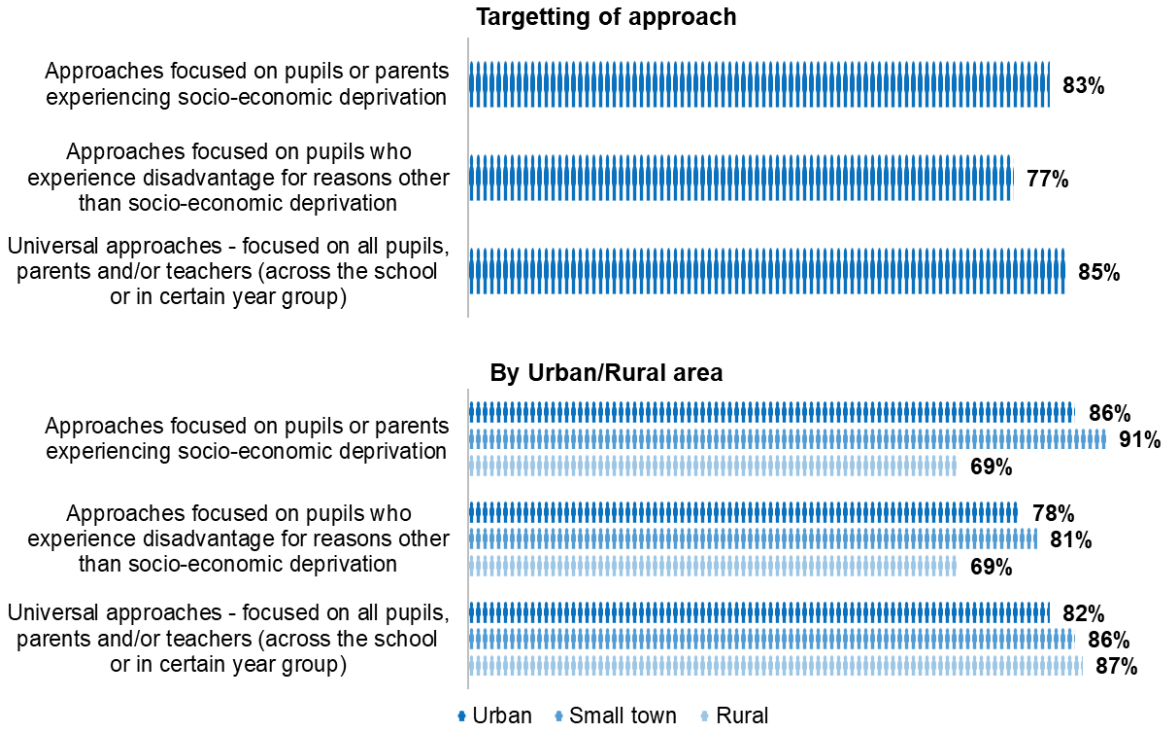
Figure 3: Whether approach to achieving equity is embedded within the school community



Focus for achieving equity in education

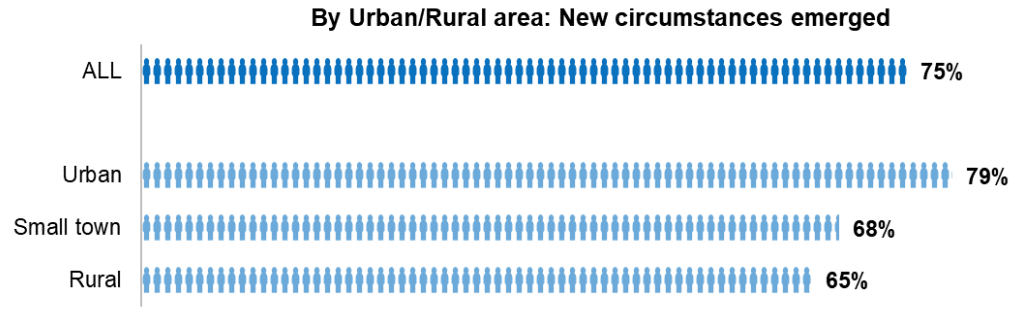
3.5. A large majority of schools have included a focus on the pupils or parents experiencing socio-economic deprivation or disadvantage as part of their approach to achieving equity; 83% include a focus on those experiencing socio-economic deprivation and 77% include a focus on other types of disadvantage. However, most schools have taken a mixed approach, with 85% of all respondents indicating that they have used ASF to support 'universal' approaches. These findings are consistent across most key respondent groups, although schools in rural areas are less likely to include a specific focus on those affected by socio-economic deprivation and/or other types of disadvantage.

Figure 4: How approach to achieving equity is targeted within the school community



3.6. The majority of schools have seen new circumstances emerge since school building closures that may need to be taken into account by their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap; 75% indicated this. Survey results show some variation across key respondent types, notably that those in urban areas were more likely than others to have seen new circumstances emerging.

Figure 5: Whether new circumstances emerged since school building closures that may require additional support to close the poverty-related attainment gap



3.7. The survey also invited respondents to provide written comments about the new circumstances they had seen emerge since school building closures. Table 3 below summarises the main points raised by respondents.

Table 3: New circumstances affecting need for support (n=306)

Theme	% of comments
Change in income, more families experiencing poverty including food and fuel poverty, risk of losing home	42%
Insecurity of employment including furlough and unemployment	39%
Health and wellbeing of pupils and parents	35%
Digital connectivity, lack of devices and internet access	34%
Emotional wellbeing and mental health of pupils and parents, isolation	32%
Struggling to engage with remote learning	24%
Parental digital literacy	15%
Parents under pressure/stress including balance of work and home schooling	12%
Increase in free meal entitlement	7%
Reduced access to other support services due to COVID-19	2%

3.8. **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income and employment within school communities** was a key theme in terms of new circumstances emerging since school building closures. This included reference to an increase in the number of pupils and families experiencing poverty, with examples cited of food and fuel poverty, and families at risk of homelessness.

More families out with traditional supports are struggling – including those who do not receive FSM or are 'traditionally' seen as experiencing poverty. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.9. Responses also made clear that families whose income and employment had been affected by COVID-19 included some who had not previously experienced poverty. These families may also have been unknown to support services.

Families who previously were not affected by poverty now affected by long COVID and unable to work and/or losing jobs and businesses. Increase in families requiring support from local foodbanks, Christmas gifts from local charities. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.10. Schools also noted the extent to which poverty can affect pupils' self-confidence, and ultimately limit their engagement with remote learning. Some suggested that pupil engagement was a particular issue for families who were experiencing poverty for the first time, including those who may have been 'just about managing' prior to the pandemic.

Many working-class families on low-income employment and zero hours contracts have slipped from just about managing to not managing. This has a knock-on effect for pupil readiness for learning, motivation and self-confidence. Children are worried about their family circumstances before they even turn to school. (Schools Programme school in urban area)

3.11. In addition to direct impacts on household income, responses also highlighted **impacts on pupil and parent health and wellbeing, including emotional and mental health**. Around a third of those providing comment referred to an increase in the number of pupils and families with support needs related to their health and wellbeing. This included some who referred to a significant increase in needs. Responses also referred to difficulties for families in accessing in-person support services due to COVID-19 related restrictions, and to an ongoing shortage of support services to meet the increase in mental health needs.

Mental wellbeing is suffering across the community – there are not enough professionals available to deal with this need quickly and effectively. Our school does not have the expertise to support some of our worst hit families. (Challenge Authority school in small town)

3.12. Some schools reflected on how the pandemic and associated government restrictions had impacted the mental health of pupils and families. This included the impact of isolation and reduced access to (formal and informal) supports, and the stresses experienced by families trying to balance remote learning, childcare and work commitments.

> *Increased mental health concerns for families due to the isolation and reduction in face to face supports. Increased stress for families as they attempt to support children carrying out remote learning with limited ICT knowledge or technical difficulties – and juggling childcare and work commitments. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

3.13. A number of respondents reported that some families had turned to schools for immediate support, where they were unable to access other support services. These schools reported some concerns regarding the extent to which staff had the skills and capacity required to meet these needs, with some having seen an adverse impact on staff wellbeing.

> *A real lack of supports available from other services. More families in crisis than before and looking to schools for immediate support. This in turn is having a major impact on the wellbeing of staff in schools. (PEF-only school in urban area)*

3.14. As noted above, schools highlighted potential for impacts around employment, income and health/wellbeing to affect the **ability of pupils to engage with remote learning**. This was also reflected in wider concerns regarding the extent to which some pupils had difficulty engaging with remote learning. A number of schools suggested that engagement had been a particular issue during the first phase of government restrictions, but had improved subsequently as pupils and families have adapted to the requirements of remote learning.

> *Many families did not engage in online learning during the first period of lockdown due to family circumstances, lack of equipment, difficulties navigating online programmes, etc. As a result there was a marked difference in ability between those who had engaged and those who had not. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.15. **Digital connectivity and skills** were also noted as a significant barrier for some pupils engaging in remote learning. This included in terms of access to digital devices (with particular challenges for households with multiple pupils requiring access) and internet

connectivity. Some noted that programmes to supply devices and connectivity to families had helped to improve pupil engagement.

> *A lack of digital access is a major issue for many of our pupils. They are struggling to access online content from home. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.16. However, schools also highlighted the extent to which a lack of parental skills and confidence can limit pupil engagement in remote learning. This was seen as a particular issue in relation to digital technologies, with some noting that provision of digital devices has only a limited impact if parents struggle to support pupils in making use of these.

> *A lot of parents do not have the capacity to support remote learning, due to educational background and work commitments. We have worked hard to provide digital devices and internet dongles. However, families with multiple children continue to struggle to meet the demands of remote learning. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

> *We have become more aware of the lack of parental confidence, knowledge and understanding of technology to support learning. This leads to poor engagement even where devices have been provided. (Schools Programme school in small town)*

3.17. Headteachers were also invited to provide written comment on whether and how they had adapted their approach in response to these new circumstances. The main points raised by responses are summarised below.

Table 4: How adapted approach in response to new circumstances (n=289)

Theme	% of comments
Support for parents and families including those struggling with remote learning	65%
Increased focus on mental health including counselling and emotional support	21%
Digital connectivity support including skills development	21%
Building on community links and partnerships to reach more families in need	17%
Increased focus on health and wellbeing support, nurture	17%
Foodbanks and other support with food/meals	16%
Helping families to access financial support, grants	8%
Additional staffing skills and capacity, including skills development in digital learning and mental health/trauma	8%
Recovery planning for enhanced/expanded provision on return to school	8%
Clothing bank	8%
Linking and signposting to other support services	5%
Initiatives to reduce cost of the school day	5%

3.18. Some of the comments provided here noted the importance of **tailoring support to the specific circumstances of pupils and families**. This included reference to use of varying approaches to improve communication with families, as a means of generating a more complete picture of families' circumstances. Responses also reflected the range of new challenges that may be affecting families including financial challenges (particularly around the cost of the school day), deterioration in health and wellbeing, and a need for third party support.

> *We have had to listen carefully to what our families and children are telling us to allow us to intervene appropriately. We have expanded efforts to combat the cost of the school day, continued the work of our Health and Wellbeing Champion, and have furthered work with 3rd sector partners to support families. We have also surveyed families to ensure all have devices to access online learning. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.19. **Digital connectivity** was again a key factor in terms of tailoring support to pupils and families. For some schools, this was also useful as a route to discussion of other poverty-related impacts. Responses also highlighted the importance of hands-on support with pupils and families 'where they are', in helping families make use of digital resources and to engage with other aspects of the

school's approach. The importance of hands-on working was also reflected in the extent to which ASF-supported interventions included a focus on attendance.

> *Supporting families with digital connectivity has allowed a safe route to discussion around other impacts of poverty in the home that previously may not have come to light. We have seen that the support families require is more hands on and meets them where they are. In-school interventions have worked very well but we are identifying that attendance underpins the rationale for many of our planned interventions. (Schools Programme school in urban area)*

3.20. Responses also referred to a **range of specific supports provided to pupils and families**. These included reference to a range of issues related to the impact of COVID-19 on income and financial circumstances, such as signposting to benefit maximisation services and potential grants, provision of food parcels and help with the cost of the school day. Some schools referred to this use of community supports and services as helping to engage families in the school community.

> *Accessing funding while families get Universal Credit sorted, applying for grants. Being creative to find ways of supporting families to engage with school including through strong community links/partnerships. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.21. Mental health and emotional support were also key themes for the supports provided to pupils and families. Respondents referred to an increase in need for counselling and mental health services, including multi-agency support packages for vulnerable families.

> *We have provided food parcels and stationery and anticipate this need to continue. More families needing support with remote learning in terms of devices and access to internet – this has been addressed to some degree but the need continues. Greater emotional support to families, greater demand on counselling and greater need for multi-agency working to protect and support vulnerable families. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

3.22. As is noted earlier, a substantial number of schools had seen an increase in the number of families affected by poverty. Some expressed concern that free school meal entitlement may not be sufficient to capture the full range of emerging support needs. These respondents suggested that a focus on 'just managing' families may be required to reach pupils who may not be entitled to

free school meals, but who may be affected by the poverty-related attainment gap.

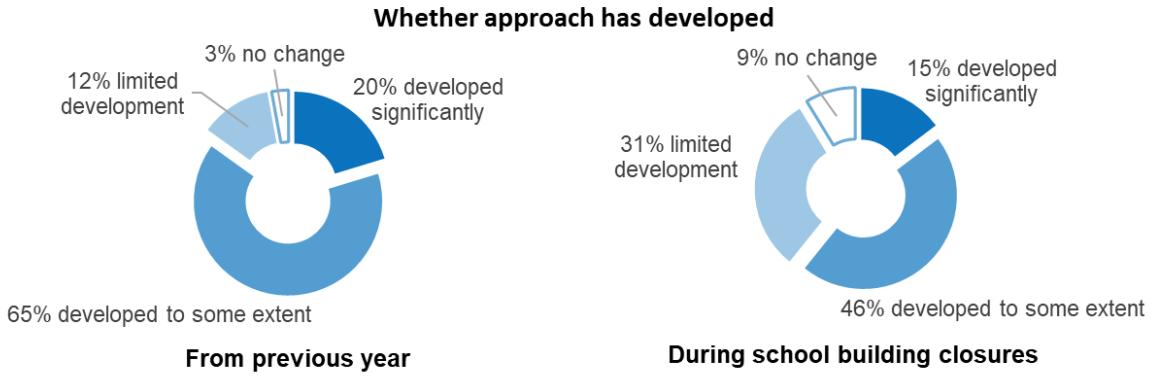
> *We may need to look at ways of supporting pupils whose families earn just over the current allowance to qualify for free school meals. (Challenge Authority school in rural area)*

Responding to changing circumstances

3.23. A large majority of schools had developed their approach to achieving equity from the previous school year; 85% indicated that their approach at the start of 2019/20 had developed from 2018/19, including 20% where the approach had 'developed significantly'. This represents an increase on the previous survey, where 67% indicated that their approach had changed from the previous year.

3.24. A substantial proportion of schools also further developed their approach to achieving equity during school building closures in March to June 2020; 61% indicated this, including 15% where the approach had 'developed significantly' during this period. This finding was broadly consistent across key respondent groups. However, survey findings suggest that schools were more likely to have developed their approach during school closures if their approach had developed from the previous year. For example, 81% of schools who had significantly developed their approach from 2018/19 continued to develop their approach during school building closures, compared with 24% of schools who had little or no development from 2018/19.

Figure 6: To what extent approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap has developed



3.25. Schools had the opportunity to provide written comment describing how their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap had developed during the period of school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 5: Where approach had developed during school building closures (n=214)

Theme	% of comments
Support for learning at home including digital and other resources, refined pedagogical approach	62%
Focus on pupil and family wellbeing, regular 'check-ins', mental health and emotional support	38%
Focus on tackling poverty, deprivation, supporting access to financial support, support with food and clothing	19%
Responding to an increasing scale of need	16%
Building community links, links with support services	10%
Increasing awareness and understanding of family circumstances and needs	5%

3.26. Responses made clear that, for many schools, this period had involved multiple changes to their approach to closing the poverty-related attainment. This most commonly involved reference to **support for remote learning**, including adapting the teaching approach and targeting of support (including around digital connectivity). Responses also highlighted the importance of engagement with pupils and families, in supporting their engagement in remote learning, and as a means of monitoring progress.

> *All vulnerable pupils and families were identified and allocated dedicated support, including weekly calls. Pupils were supported through Microsoft Teams and could contact their teachers whenever needed. Devices were loaned and paper packs issued as appropriate, and IT support was made available. Engagement was monitored weekly and contact made to provide support where concerns were raised. We now have daily registration with a built-in wellbeing and learning check. (PEF-only school in rural area)*

3.27. Comments on the development of remote learning approaches also made clear that this had been an iterative process for some, with schools adapting their approach based on experience and feedback from pupils and families. However, some also made clear that access to digital connectivity and resources remained a challenge.

We struggled with our online learning initially as we were using a homework only platform and many pupils did not have digital devices. We supported families through our online learning platform, and ensured every young person was contacted once a week for a 'check-in' focused on mental health and wellbeing – looked after children and young carers were contacted more often. We identified those not engaging in online learning and were able to support some families, but not the number needed due to lack of digital resources. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.28. A substantial number of those providing comment had also made changes focused on pupil and family circumstances more widely. **Health and wellbeing** emerged as an important theme, with some schools noting that their experience had highlighted the importance of mental wellbeing support for pupil engagement. Some indicated that increased use of 'check-in' contact had been sufficient to meet families' needs, while others had required interagency support to meet increasing mental and emotional wellbeing related needs.

Children were receiving learning via digital means but didn't have the technology. As more families struggled, check-in phone calls became more frequent. When families really began to struggle, it became apparent that mental and emotional wellbeing was paramount. We had to request support from many other agencies through this time. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.29. Comments also highlighted the challenges faced by schools in responding to the increased number of **families affected by poverty**. This included reference to the prevalence of mental health needs amongst those newly affected by poverty. Schools described a range of approaches and support provided to these families including help to access financial support, help with costs such as food and clothing, and access to mental health support.

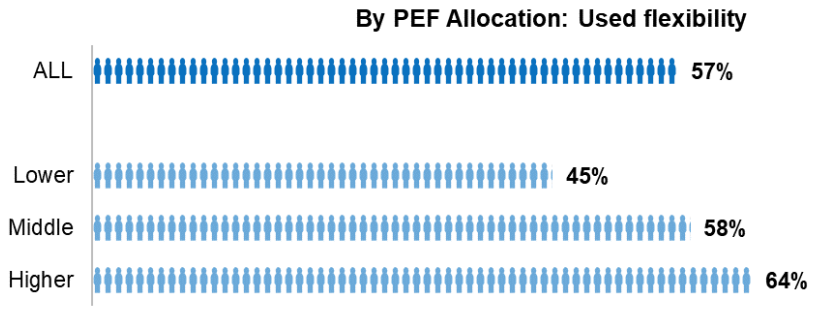
Many new families now come under the 'vulnerable category' - mental health and emotional difficulties have been a huge factor. We have supported families in numerous ways: supporting access to technology and use of online learning, and supporting their family circumstances (e.g. finding a counsellor to provide weekly sessions, weekly check-in calls, monitoring pupil interactions, signposting families to supports for bills/food/clothing). (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.30. **Understanding the challenges faced by families** emerged as a key theme in the development of schools' approaches during school building closures. As noted above, schools highlighted the value of increased engagement with pupils and families in improving understanding of their circumstances and needs. A number of headteachers also referred to the value of hub working in enabling staff to engage with a diverse range of pupils, and develop a better understanding of the full range of needs. For some, this work had identified new groups of pupils affected by school building closures and in need of additional support. These headteachers emphasised the value of ASF support in enabling schools to tailor their response to the specific circumstances of pupils.

> *We became much more aware of what families had experienced. We have identified a group of pupils disadvantaged during school building closures and they are now being monitored closely in case they fall behind - PEF / Attainment Challenge funding has really helped us in this situation as we have been able to create new roles to help our own circumstances. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.31. More than half of schools (57%) had used the additional flexibility in how they use ASF funds introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was some variation across key respondent groups in take-up of this flexibility, most notably that secondary schools and those with higher PEF allocations were more likely than others to have made use of this flexibility.

Figure 7: Whether used COVID-19 flexibility to change aspects of how ASF funds used in school



3.32. Schools had the opportunity to provide written comment describing how they had made use of this additional flexibility in how ASF funds could be used in school. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 6: How used additional flexibility in response to COVID-19 pandemic (n=214)

Theme	% of comments
Digital resources and connectivity, supporting remote learning	38%
Remote learning resources and support	34%
Additional staffing capacity, including a focus on supporting remote learning	31%
Additional support services with a health and wellbeing focus, links with other services	16%
Supporting outdoor access and learning	8%
Targeting those affected by poverty, support with food, clothing, etc	7%
More family and community engagement	1%

3.33. Responses indicate that this was primarily focused on **using ASF funds to support remote learning**. Providing digital resources and connectivity was the most common theme here, with a number of schools referring to the importance of improving digital connectivity and other resources in supporting remote learning.

> *Additional devices have been purchased to increase ICT capacity for remote learning. This has allowed staff to deliver better quality learning and teaching. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.34. Some also noted that the increased focus on digital connectivity and resources for remote learning had been in part a response to wider COVID-19 restrictions. These schools referred to having adapted their approach, temporarily moving away from wider experiences which had been curtailed by COVID-19, and thus placing greater emphasis on digital connectivity.

> *COVID restrictions limited our ability to continue the types of wider experiences such as learning to swim, visits to museums and the cinema etc. We have changed our plans to invest in ICT for pupils and staff. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.35. In addition to ensuring pupils had the required digital connectivity, headteachers also noted that additional flexibility had allowed them to respond to other emerging needs. This included reference to provision of food and clothing parcels, stationery and learning resources to assist with the cost of the school day, and learning/development for parents and carers.

Funds used to provide resources for pupils and families to use at home (including digital devices), to provide food and clothing for families, to provide CLD and help parents and carers access courses. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

Provided stationery packs for all pupils, purchasing and introducing a new reading scheme (allowing online distribution of reading books) and a new Maths resource. Purchasing subscription to online learning scheme and Outdoor Learning training for staff. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

3.36. A substantial number of those providing comment had used the flexibility to increase staffing capacity. For some, this reflected a wider view that staff input is a key success factor in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and some noted that flexibility in use of funding had enabled them to respond to increased pupil and family needs without adversely affecting teacher workload. This included use of data to tailor approaches, with the additional benefit of building staff skills and capacity in use of data and evidence.

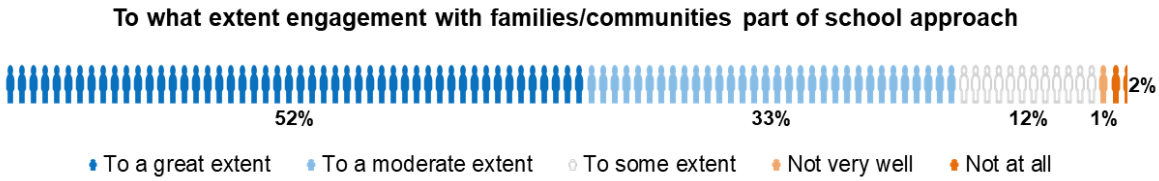
To support our plans to widen this approach across the curriculum, a teacher has been commissioned using PEF funding to analyse subject data and support teachers to design appropriate interventions where gaps are identified. This enabled us to move forward with our plans without adversely impacting on teacher workload and has also built teacher capacity for moving forward next session. (PEF-only school in rural area)

Engaging with families and communities

3.37. A large majority of schools had used engagement with families and communities as part of their school's approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap; 85% indicated this, including 52% who used family/community engagement 'to a great extent'.

3.38. There was some variation across key respondent groups in use of family and community engagement. Most notably, secondary schools and those with higher PEF allocations were more likely to have used family and community engagement.

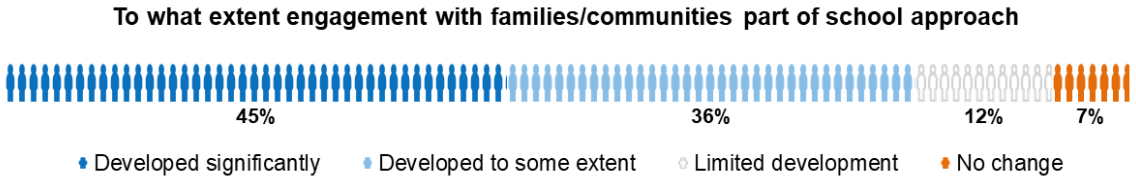
Figure 8: To what extent engagement with families and communities has been part of school's approach



3.39. A large majority of schools had developed their approach to family/community engagement during school building closures; 81% indicated this, including 45% who had developed their approach significantly.

3.40. There was again some variation across key respondent groups, with secondary schools and those with higher PEF allocations more likely to have developed their approach to engagement.

Figure 9: To what extent approach to engaging with families/communities has developed during school building closures



3.41. Schools had the opportunity to provide written comment on how they had developed their approach to family and community engagement during the period of school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 7: How developed approach to family engagement during school building closures (n=285)

Theme	% of comments
More 'outreach' communication with families inc. regular 'check in', gathering feedback, improving understanding of circumstances/needs	81%
More tailored approach, supporting the most vulnerable families	18%
More community engagement, building links with community support	15%
Provision of remote learning resources	14%
Tackling poverty, deprivation, supporting access to financial support, support with food and clothing	14%
Provision of digital resources and support	10%
Greater focus on wellbeing including mental health and emotional support, counselling	10%
Responding to an increasing scale of need	2%
Specific work to improve engagement with families with English as an Additional Language	2%

3.42. **Extending use of 'outreach' communication** was by far the most common way in which schools' approach to family and community engagement had developed. A large majority of those providing comment referred to use of more frequent contact to build relationships and improve understanding of family circumstances and needs. This included a particular focus on regular wellbeing checks, with some noting the benefits of ensuring that pupils and families feel nurtured.

> *All families are phoned by class teachers on a weekly basis and contacted by text or e-mail twice weekly to support remote learning. Families feel nurtured and are able to ask for resources delivered by staff. Live lessons allowed some more vulnerable parents to learn alongside their children, improving their capacity to support remote learning. This is a practice we will continue, albeit in a reduced form, after school buildings re-open. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

3.43. Respondents also referred to the variety of approaches used to engage with the most vulnerable pupils and families. This included reference to multiple communication channels such as social media and video messages, and referral to third parties to provide the support required, particularly for those affected by poverty.

> *Increased use of social media to promote community and school identity and sense of belonging. Use of video messages to pupils, parents & carers to support health and wellbeing and school ethos. Weekly contacts for all families, and more often for identified pupils & families. School referrals to local charities for food and fuel poverty support. Regular remote learning packs for collection via school grounds or delivery to pupils' home. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

3.44. Focusing engagement on the most vulnerable families was also a key element for some schools. This again involved a variety of approaches to reach out to pupils and families, with responses referring to methods such as Virtual Parent Partnership meetings and community wellbeing walks.

> *Vulnerable families were contacted on a weekly basis. Inclusion drop-ins were open to families and counselling was widened to support some parents. Engagement was maintained through Virtual Parent Partnership meetings, wellbeing walks in the community and doorstep catch-ups where necessary. Support for Learning staff maintained weekly contact with pupils and families to provide a range of bespoke supports. (PEF-only school in rural area)*

3.45. Comments also made clear that the understanding developed through family engagement was used by schools as **an opportunity to address other needs**. This included reference to engagement with remote learning, health and wellbeing, supporting those affected by poverty, and signposting to other supports.

> *Initially, our focus was on maintaining contact with the families that we had deemed vulnerable. As many more families began to experience financial, social and emotional difficulties, Senior Management Team maintained contact with every family to ensure they were as safe as possible and that their needs were being met. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

> *Significant rises in door-step visits, developed links to local food and support charities, signposting financial inclusion support and local authority supports, mental health supports for parents. (Challenge Authority school in rural area)*

4. Use of data and evaluation

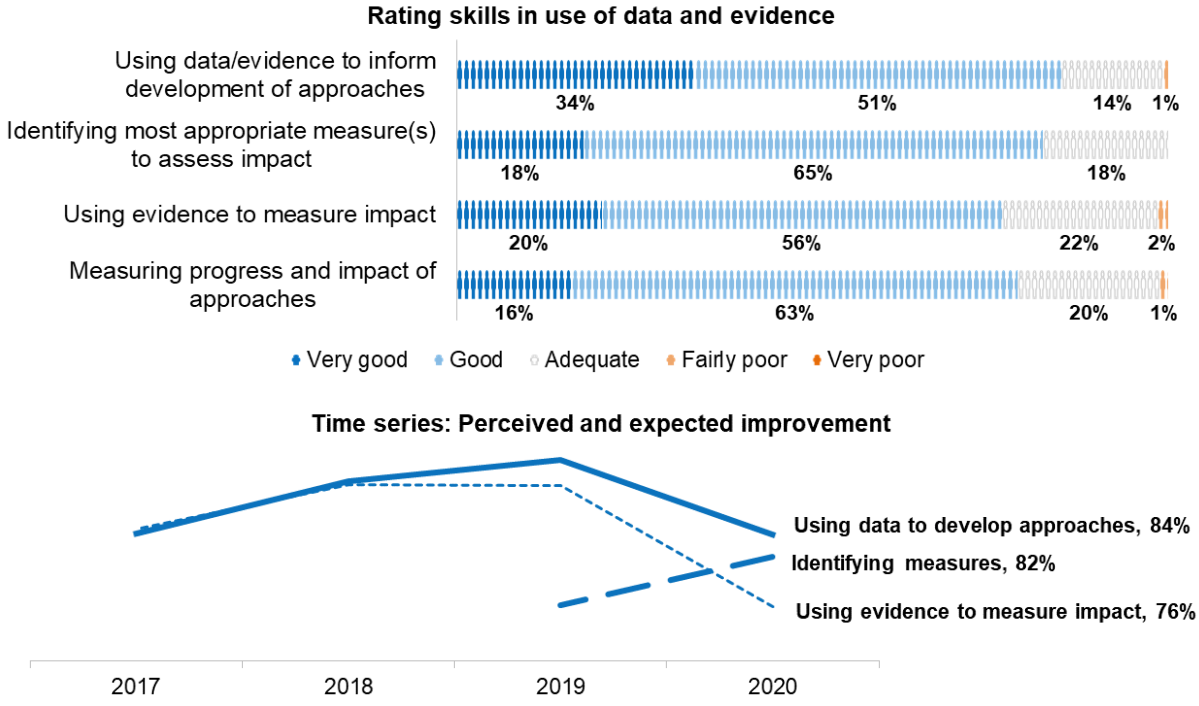
4.1. This section summarises survey findings on schools' use of data and evaluation in relation to ASF supported approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

4.2. A large majority of headteachers felt that they are 'very good' or 'good' in using data and evidence to inform development of their approach; 84% indicated this. This represents a nine-point decrease from 2019 and is similar to the 2017 survey.

4.3. Headteachers were also positive about their skills in measuring the impact of their approaches; 82% were positive about their ability to identify appropriate measures, and 76% were positive about their use of evidence to measure impact. However, the latter result represents a 14-point decrease from the 2018 and 2019 surveys (where 90% felt they used evidence to effectively measure impact). It is also notable that PEF-only schools and those with lower PEF allocations were less positive than others on this indicator.

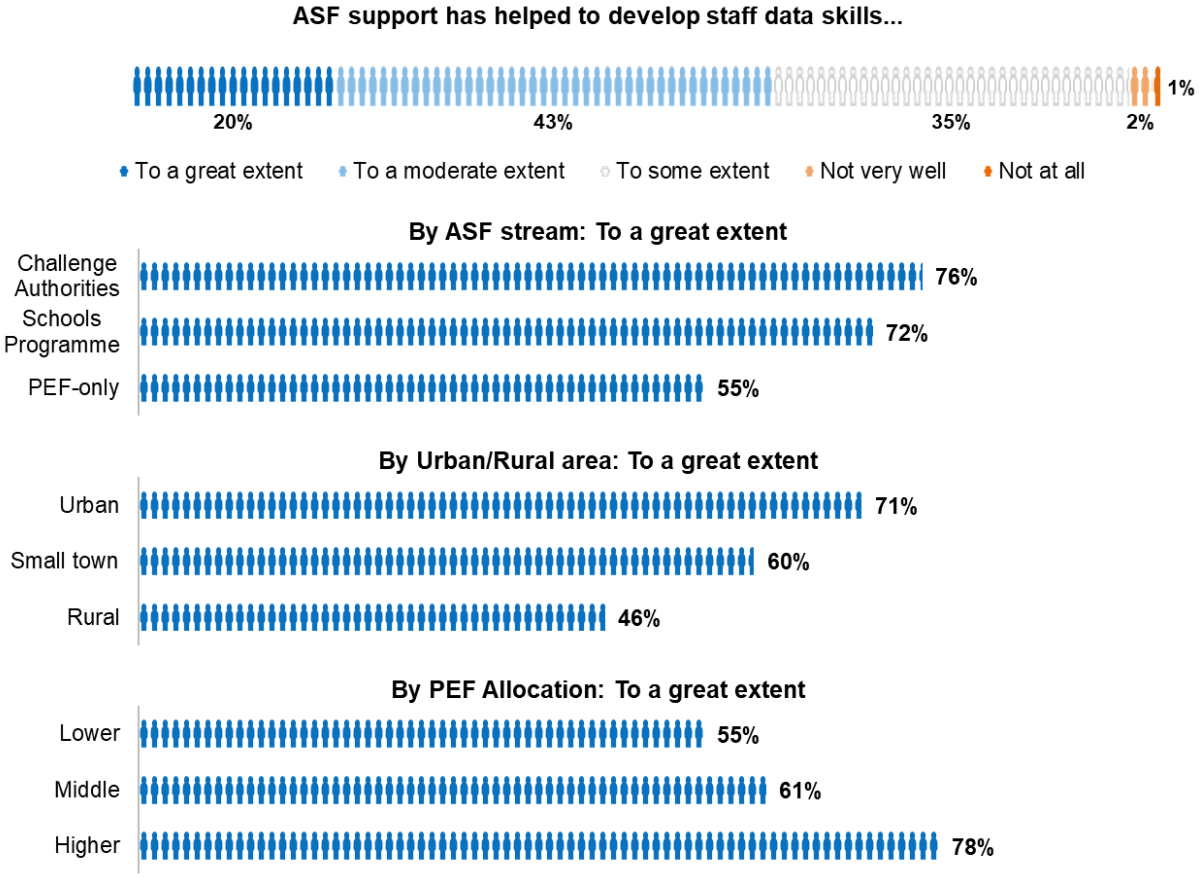
4.4. More than three quarters (78%) felt that they are 'very good' or 'good' at measuring the progress and impact of ASF-supported approaches. This finding was broadly consistent across key respondent groups.

Figure 10: Rating of school's approach to use of data and evaluation



4.5. The majority of schools feel that ASF support has helped to develop staff skills and knowledge in using data and evaluation; 63% indicated that ASF had helped to develop these skills to a 'great' or 'moderate' extent. Survey findings indicate some significant variation in views across key respondent groups. In particular, PEF-only schools, those in rural areas and those with lower PEF allocations were less positive on this measure.

Figure 11: To what extent ASF support helped to develop staff skills and knowledge in using data and evaluation



5. Impact

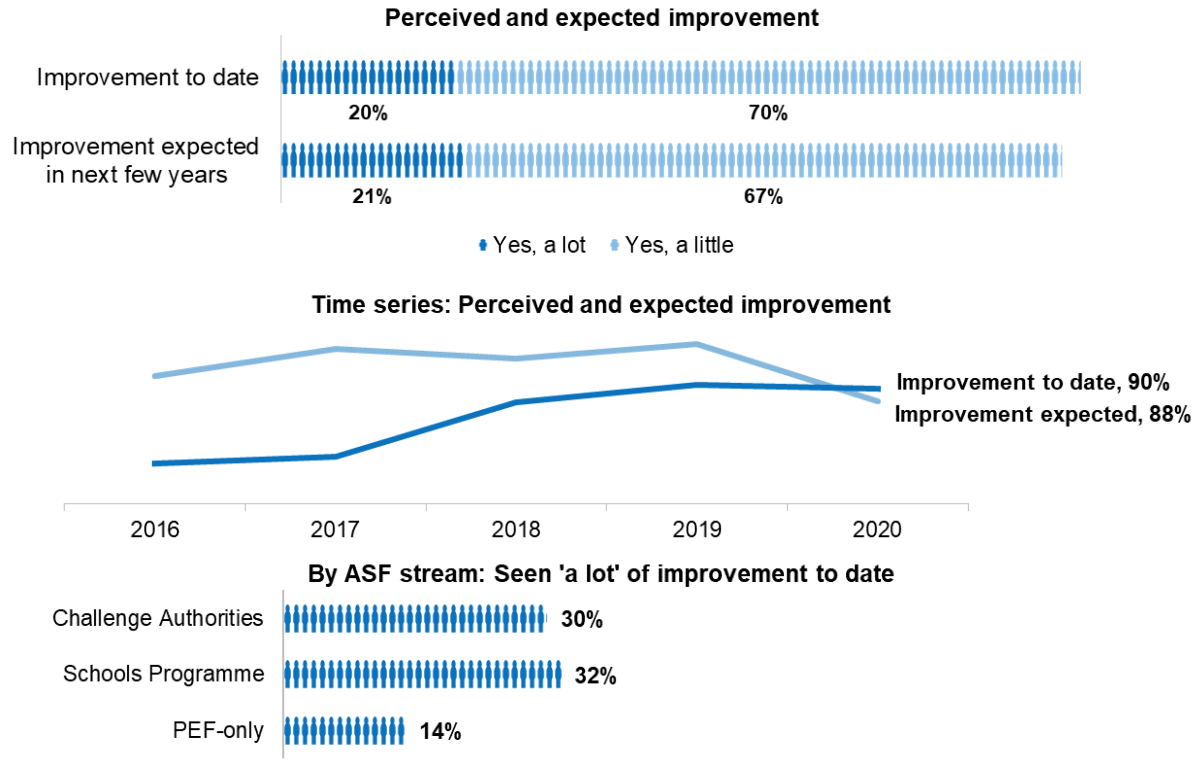
5.1. This section summarises views on the impact of ASF supported approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This includes the factors that contribute to or limit success, and whether impacts are likely to be sustainable.

Progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap

5.2. A large majority (90%) of schools reported seeing an improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment and/or health and wellbeing as a result of ASF supported approaches. This included 20% that had seen 'a lot' of improvement to date. Survey data indicates that PEF-only schools were less likely to have seen 'a lot' of improvement to date.

5.3. A similar number of schools (88%) expected to see improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap over the next few years, although this represents a 10-point reduction since the 2019 survey. Survey responses also indicated some correlation between schools having already seen improvement, and expectations of further improvement; 67% of those who had seen 'a lot' of improvement to date expected to see 'a lot' more, compared with 11% of those who had only seen 'a little' improvement to date.

Figure 12: Perceived improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment or health/wellbeing



5.4. Headteachers were asked to provide written comment in support of their response around having seen improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in their school. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 8: Seen 'a lot' of improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap (n=89)

Theme	% of comments
Teaching and staffing resources	25%
Focus on health and wellbeing, including mental health and nurture	21%
Ability to implement approaches relevant to school	20%
Have made progress despite lockdown disruption to learning, use of remote learning etc to mitigate impact	12%
Higher quality learning and teaching	11%
Use of evidence/data and approach to evaluation	10%
Training and skills development	10%
Engagement with parents, carers and families	8%
Shared commitment to achieving equity in education	3%
Attainment Advisor, local authority support	2%

5.5. For **schools that have seen 'a lot' of improvement**, comments most commonly related to teaching and staffing resources. This included schools which had identified staffing input as a key driver of improvement, and where this informed ongoing approaches. Schools also referred to staffing input from other workers including counselling and other support, and this reflected a wider focus on health and wellbeing. Comments here included specific reference to mental health (such as use of nurture-based approaches) but also approaches focused on other aspects of pupil wellbeing such as nutrition, outdoor access and physical fitness.

5.6. Headteachers who had not seen any real improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap were also asked to provide written comment. The main points raised are summarised below.

Table 9: Have not seen improvement in closing poverty-related attainment gap (n=28)

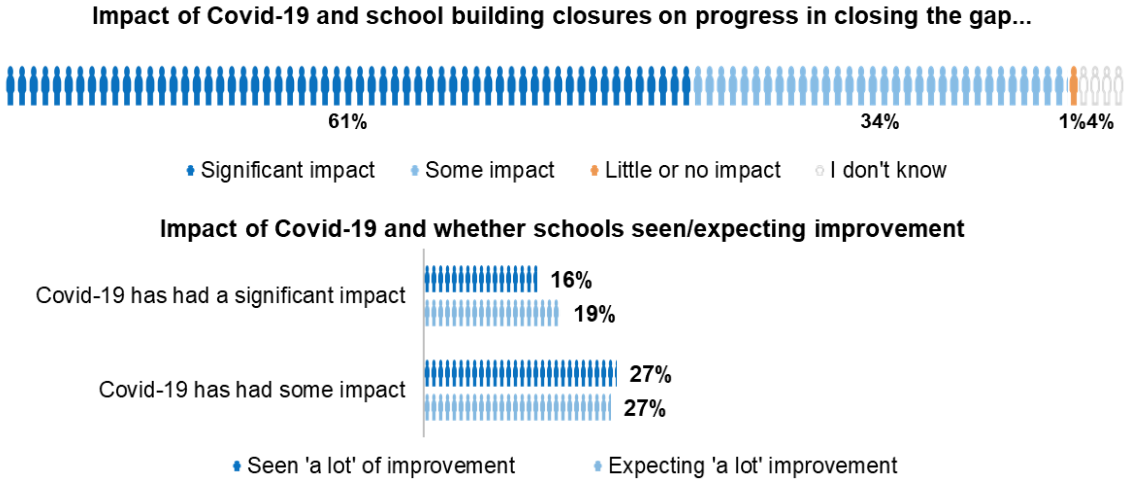
Theme	% of comments
Impact of pandemic, lack of face-to-face contact, pressure on resources	46%
Headteacher new in post, too early to say for this year	32%
Pressure on staff time, and workload	18%
Limited PEF allocation	7%
Pressures on families, remote learning	4%

5.7. For **schools that have not seen any improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap**, comments most commonly referred to the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These schools referred to school building closures resulting in extended periods without face-to-face contact with pupils. Some were of the view that this may have resulted in a worsening of the poverty-related attainment gap, particularly where schools had to suspend approaches based on close group working with targeted pupils. Some referred to new approaches having been developed in response to school building closures, but noted that these had taken time to fully implement, and suggested that a longer period will be required to assess impact.

5.8. The great majority of schools (95%) felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. This included 61% who felt that COVID-19 and school building closures had a 'significant impact' on their progress. Secondary schools and those with middle to higher PEF allocations were most likely to feel that their progress had been significantly affected by COVID-19 and school building closures.

5.9. Survey findings also indicate some correlation between perceived impact of COVID-19, and perceived improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. For example, those who felt that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on their school were less likely to have seen 'a lot' of improvement to date.

Figure 13: Perceived impact of COVID-19 and school building closures on progress in closing the poverty-related gap in attainment or health/wellbeing



Factors influencing impact

5.10. In addition to variation across respondent groups (such as funding stream, PEF allocation and urban/rural geography), survey analysis also considered correlation between perceived progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap and other aspects of headteachers' experiences. This considered a wide range of factors including schools' approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, headteachers' understanding and awareness in shaping that approach, embedding equity, use of evidence, collaborative working, and views on availability of support for PEF.

5.11. This analysis indicates that a number of respondent groups are more likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap (see the table below). In particular, survey results indicate that key factors in closing the poverty-related attainment gap include **changes of culture or ethos** (such as embedding the approach to equity or improved collaborative working), **better understanding of barriers** faced by pupils and families, skills and knowledge in **use of data and evidence**, and **engagement with families and communities**. This is similar to the findings of the 2019 survey, which highlighted changes in culture and ethos and improved understanding of barriers faced by pupils.

Table 10: Respondent groups most likely to have seen progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap

Respondent group
Feel that approach to achieving equity has been embedded within school community
Feel they understand the challenges and barriers faced by pupils and parents affected by poverty
Feel ASF has helped to develop staff data and evidence skills
Have seen an increase in collaborative working
Feel their measuring of progress and impact of approaches is 'very good' or 'good'
Feel their use of data and evidence to measure impact is 'very good' or 'good'
Engagement with families and communities has been part of the school approach
Approach to equity has developed from the previous school year

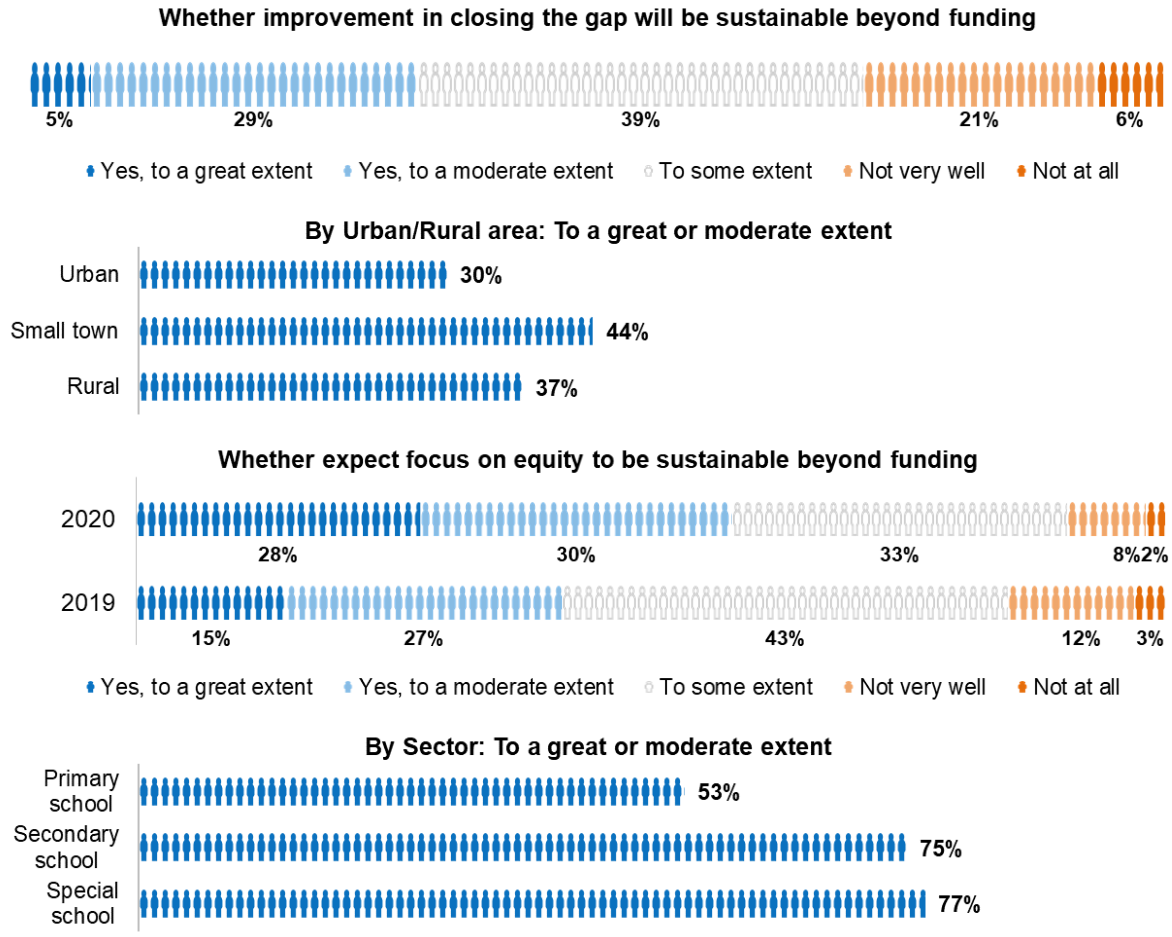
Sustainability of impact

5.12. Around a third (34%) of headteachers expected that the ASF supported improvement they had seen to date will be sustainable beyond the years of funding. This represents a seven-point reduction from the 2019 survey, although there has been a change in the question structure for the present survey which makes direct

comparison difficult. Survey findings also show some variation across key respondent groups, with those in urban areas less likely to feel that their progress to date will be sustainable.

5.13. Views were more positive on the extent to which the focus on equity will be sustainable beyond the years of funding; 58% felt that this will be the case, a 17-point increase on the 2019 survey. Survey findings show some variation across key respondent groups, with primary schools less likely to feel that the focus on equity will be sustainable beyond funding.

Figure 14: Views on sustainability of improvements



5.14. Schools had the opportunity to provide written comment in support of their view that progress to date and/or the focus on equity in their school will be sustainable beyond funding. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 11: Those who feel progress/focus will be sustainable (n=222)

Theme	% of comments
Staff training, skills development	33%
Developed capacity to use data/evidence to inform approaches	19%
Ongoing access to resources	18%
Embedded practice, pedagogy development	16%
Longer-term health and wellbeing impacts	14%
Raising awareness and change of ethos/culture	10%
Collaboration within school, with partners and parents	1%

5.15. Those who felt that **progress to date and/or the focus on equity will be sustainable** most commonly referred to a view that staff skills and capacity developed through ASF-supported approaches will be sustainable beyond funding, even if the approaches themselves do not continue in their current form. The importance of staff skills and capacity was also referenced specifically in relation to use of evidence to inform the ongoing approach to achieving equity.

> *We have developed a culture of evidence-informed practice and a greater understanding of the barriers some of our young people face. Departments are far more adept at assessing data against SIMD, ASN, LAAC, etc. Development of staff knowledge and skills will ensure that the initiatives and projects will continue to have a positive impact on our young people for some time to come. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

5.16. Written comments also reflected on the importance of the sustainability of culture and ethos, including through sharing of good practice. Responses referred to the sustainability of practice around literacy and numeracy, but also sustainability of culture and ethos including for example the focus on health/wellbeing and nurture.

> *Our health and wellbeing programme will be sustainable as we have a whole school policy and all teachers currently in our school have benefitted from training in this area. Literacy and numeracy improvements will be sustained as we can build on the developments made in these areas and use resources bought to support teaching and learning. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

Developing a nurturing approach across the whole school, staff members who have had training in specific areas to share that good practice so that it can happen in all classes. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

5.17. A number of schools also referred to evidence of the positive impact of the change in culture and ethos, for example in terms of maintaining the quality of relationships and levels of pupil engagement throughout school building closures.

All staff are committed to enhancing and developing relationships and nurturing practices, regardless of funding. Children and parents will continue to be supported by us when they need to be. Engaging with our parents and families has been challenging during COVID but survey results suggest that we are managing to maintain the very positive relationships and engagement levels before COVID. (Schools Programme school in urban area)

5.18. Schools who did not expect progress to date and/or the focus on equity in their school to be sustainable beyond funding also had the opportunity to provide written comment in support of this view. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 12: Those who feel progress/focus will not be sustainable (n=61)

Theme	% of comments
Loss of staffing and skills	57%
Loss of initiatives and approaches/interventions	31%
Difficult to predict at present, potential future impact of COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures on attainment	8%
Reduction in wider budgets/resourcing	8%
Loss of external support and access to services	7%
Pupils' health and wellbeing needs	3%

5.19. The view that **progress and/or the focus on equity will not be sustainable** was most commonly related to concerns regarding the loss of staff and skills without access to funding. These schools noted that additional staff time secured with ASF support has been crucial to delivery of approaches to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap.

Staffing may prove to be an issue for some initiatives where this has been fully funded by PEF – some interventions will not be able to be sustained. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

5.20. It was suggested that staff input – and the initiatives or approaches being delivered – could not be maintained without funding. This included reference to additional teaching input, and other staffing and skills such as provision of support and assessment of impact.

> *Without the additional funding we will be unable to offer the bespoke approaches required to overcome the significant harm caused to young people by living in poverty. Building a child's self-confidence, belief in their worth and value, and overcoming the development delay caused by lack of nurture requires staff input. This will not be sustained if we are unable to procure resources through third sector partners, employ additional staffing and purchase resources to support pupils and their families. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

6. Collaborative working

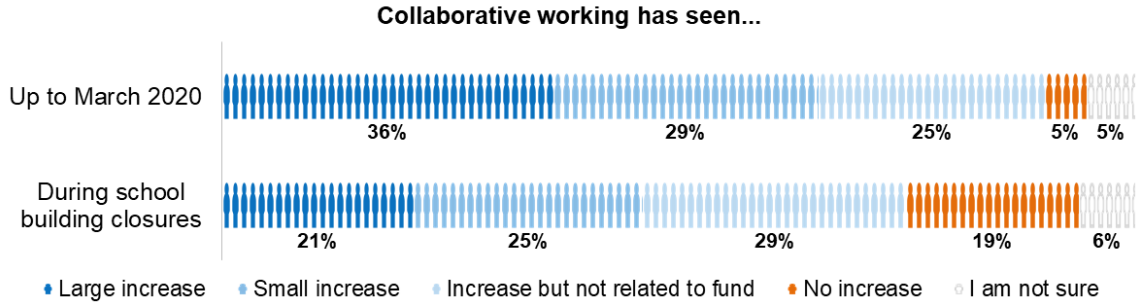
6.1. This section summarises views on whether and how ASF support has contributed to an increase in collaborative working.

6.2. The majority of headteachers had seen an increase in collaborative working in their school up to March 2020 as a result of ASF support. Nearly 2 in 3 (65%) indicated this, including more than a third (36%) who had seen a large increase in collaborative working as a result of the fund. This was broadly consistent with 2019 survey findings, although the proportion reporting increased collaboration has fallen from a peak of 77% in 2017.

6.3. A substantial proportion of headteachers indicated that they had seen a further increase in collaborative working during school building closures between March and June 2020; 46% indicated this.

6.4. Survey findings show some variation in school experiences around collaborative working. In particular, primary schools and those in rural areas were less likely to have seen an increase in collaborative working – up to and during the period of school building closures.

Figure 15: Whether seen an increase in collaborative working as a result of the Fund

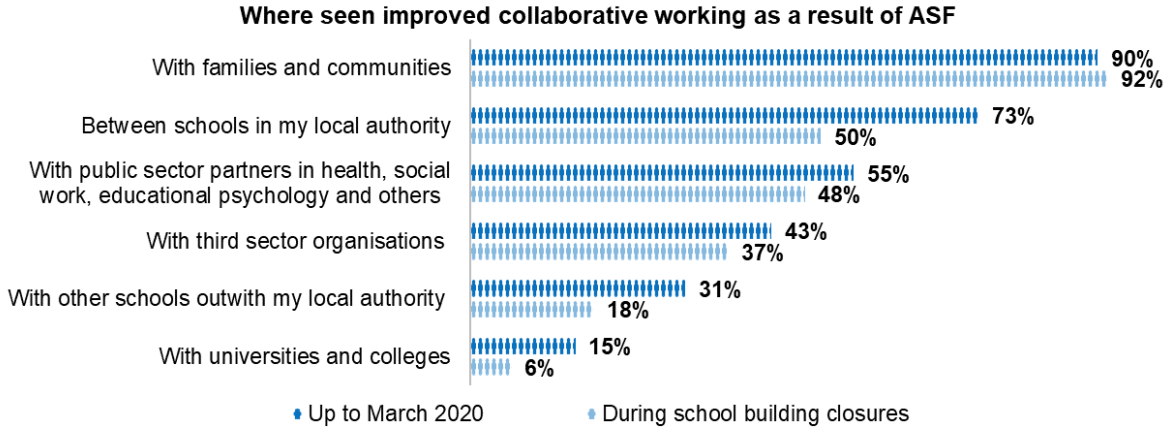


6.5. In terms of types of collaborative working, schools were most likely to have seen an increase in collaboration with families and communities, and other schools in their local authority. This applied both to the period up to and during school building closures, although survey results suggest that fewer schools were able to continue to improve collaboration with other schools during school building closures (50%, compared with 73% prior to closures). In contrast, 92% were able to continue to improve collaboration with families and communities during school building closures.

6.6. Survey findings show some variation in experience of collaboration across key respondent groups. This was particularly notable for collaboration with third sector organisations; Challenge Authority schools, secondary schools, and those in urban areas or small

towns were most likely to have built collaborative working with third sector organisations.

Figure 16: Where seen an increase in collaborative working as a result of the Fund



6.7. Headteachers were asked to provide comment outlining any new collaborations that have emerged during the period of school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 13: New collaborations established (n=155)

Theme	% of comments
With third sector organisations and community groups	37%
With public sector organisations, particularly health and social care, mental health services	21%
With other schools, primarily local cluster	20%
With families and communities	16%
With private sector organisations	5%
With universities and colleges	1%

6.8. New or improved collaboration with **third sector organisations and community groups** was the most common (referenced by more than a third of those providing comment). This included reference to national charities such as Barnardo's and Action for Children, local voluntary organisations including a particular focus on those supporting families affected by poverty (e.g. foodbanks, financial inclusion services, addressing digital poverty), Citizens' Advice, and local religious groups.

6.9. Around a fifth of those providing comment referred to new or improved collaboration with **public sector organisations**. This included schools working with NHS services (reference to specific services including mental health services and speech/language therapy), social work services, Community Learning & Development, housing services, local authority financial inclusion services, and Police Scotland.

6.10. A substantial number of those providing comment also referred to new or improved **collaboration with other schools**. This was most commonly closer working with local cluster schools, including some noting that this had been supported by input from the local authority. It was also noted that increased use of remote meeting software to support remote learning had also helped to support closer collaboration with other schools.

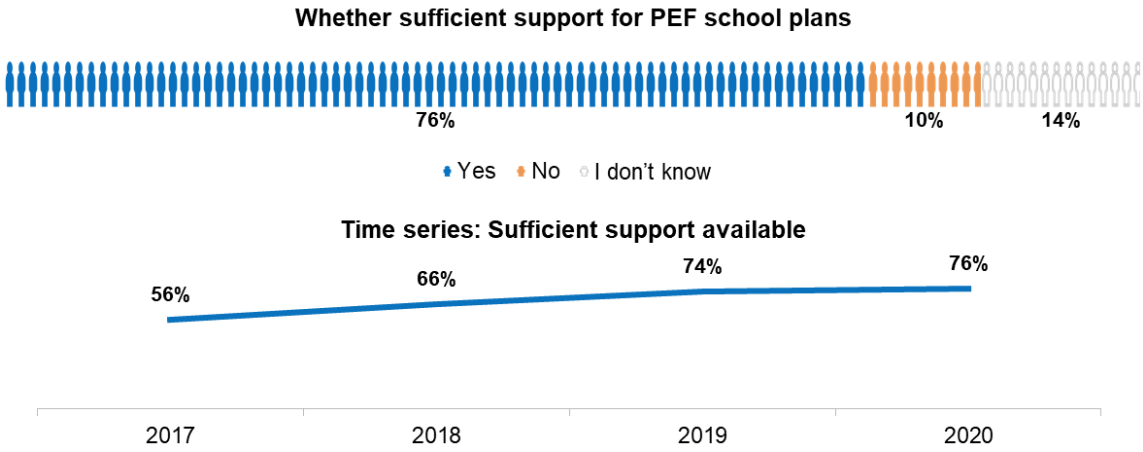
7. Pupil Equity Funding

7.1. This section summarises schools' experience around application for and receipt of PEF. This includes views on information and support available to support development of school plans for PEF, on the implementation of PEF within schools, and on the processes around the allocation of PEF.

Developing schools' approach

7.2. More than 3 in 4 (76%) headteachers felt there was sufficient support in place to develop and implement their school plan for PEF. This was similar to the 2019 survey and represents a 20-point increase on the 2017 survey. Views were broadly similar across key respondent groups.

Figure 17: Whether felt sufficient support to develop and implement school plan for PEF



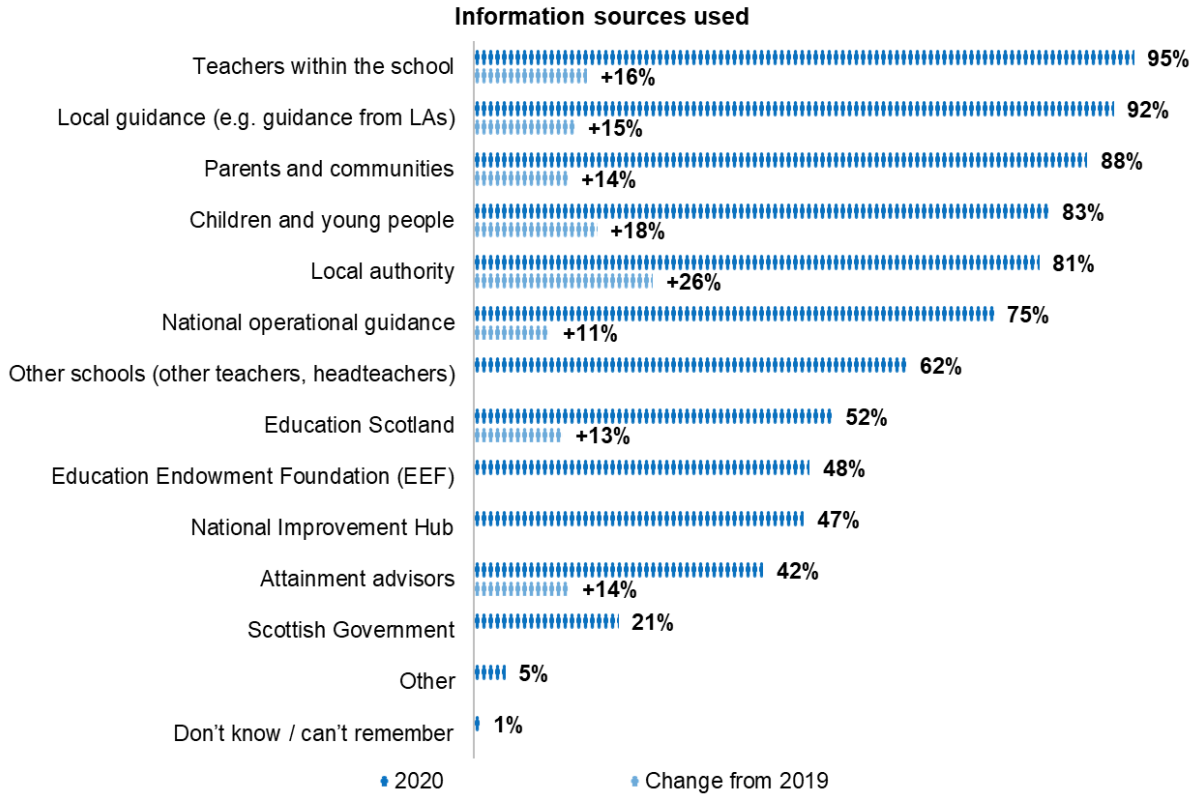
7.3. Most respondents indicated that they had used multiple information sources in developing plans for PEF. The most commonly used were teachers within the school (used by 95%), local guidance published by local authorities (92%), parents and communities (88%), children and young people (83%) and local authorities (81%).

7.4. This profile shows some change since the 2019 survey. Most notably there has been an increase in the proportion of schools engaging with local authorities, children and young people, teachers within the school, local guidance, parents and communities, Attainment Advisors, Education Scotland, and national guidance.

7.5. Survey results also show some variation across key respondent groups, primarily linked to the level of PEF allocation:

- Those with higher PEF allocations were most likely to consult with other schools, with the National Improvement Hub, with children and young people, and with parents and communities.
- Secondary schools and those with higher PEF allocations were most likely to consult the Scottish Government, and with the Education Endowment Foundation resources.

Figure 18: Information sources used when developing plans for PEF



Note: Change from 2019 only included where significant.

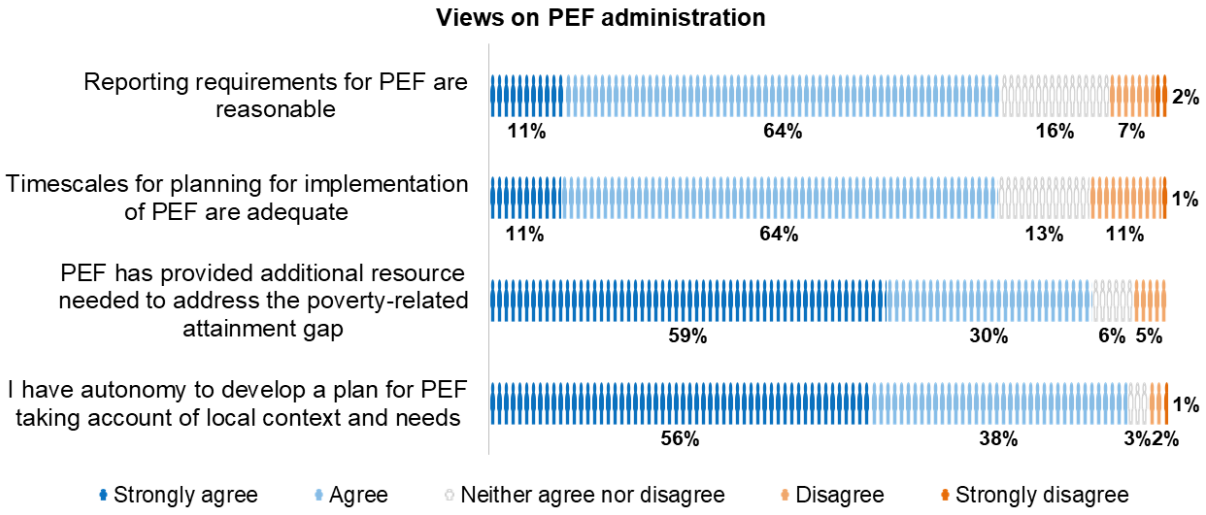
Views on PEF processes

7.6. Headteachers were generally positive in relation to processes around the allocation of PEF. Most (75%) felt that reporting requirements associated with PEF were reasonable, and a similar proportion felt that timescales for planning for PEF have been sufficient (75%). These findings each represent a 12-point improvement from the 2019 survey.

7.7. Views were also highly positive on whether PEF had provided additional resource needed to address the poverty-related attainment gap; 89% felt this has been the case. This is similar to the 2019 survey, and views were broadly consistent across key respondent groups.

7.8. The great majority of headteachers also felt they had autonomy to develop plans that are responsive to their local context and needs (94%). This view was consistent across key respondent groups and is similar to that reported in 2019.

Figure 19: Views on PEF processes and implementation



8. Learning points from school building closures

8.1. The final section of the survey included two open questions inviting headteachers to comment on their experience of school building closures, in terms of the main challenges they had faced, and how they had responded to these.

8.2. Around 300 respondents provided comment on what they felt had been the main challenges to their work in closing the poverty-related attainment gap as a result of COVID-19 and school building closures. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 14: Main challenges as a result of COVID=19 and school building closures (n=297)

Theme	% of comments
Lack of face-to-face contact, difficulties engaging pupils and families, especially the most vulnerable	62%
Pupil/family wellbeing and safety, mental health (including difficulty responding to the increasing volume of need)	23%
Difficulty adjusting to remote learning, adapting approaches to provide quality of support	20%
Digital connectivity and literacy – for pupils, families, staff	17%
Staffing skills and capacity, including recruitment	12%
Challenges for parents/families supporting remote learning	10%
Access to external support services	8%
Impact of poverty and deprivation (food, fuel, clothing, space to work, etc)	6%
Limited staff collaboration, difficulty delivering skills development and training	5%
Measuring impact and attainment	4%
Accessing resources, procurement	4%
Staff morale, wellbeing and mental health, risk assessments	4%
Adjusting to ad hoc self-isolation of pupils, anxiety about allowing pupils to return	2%

8.3. The **lack of face-to-face contact** was the challenge most commonly cited by respondents. While schools referred to having adapted their approach in light of school building closures, some suggested that a lack of in-person contact had been a continuing barrier to engagement with pupils and families. This was highlighted as a challenge in terms of delivering the curriculum, but also in maintaining targeted interventions and pastoral care.

Access to our children and not having them in school has been a challenge. The ability to resource and deliver the curriculum to our children with targeted support was a challenge. The therapeutic work we do on a daily basis could not be done in the same way as normal. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

The main challenges have been continuing interventions based on face-to-face interactions. Engagement in this online can be varied and it is difficult to insist when families have such different home circumstances. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

8.4. Some headteachers also felt that there were limitations to the extent to which approaches can be adapted to overcome the lack of face-to-face pupil contact. For some pupils, it was felt that the quiet and safety of the school environment is crucial to their learning and wellbeing.

Many children need school as a quiet, safe place and the motivation of a teacher. (PEF-only school in rural area)

8.5. The lack of face-to-face contact was seen as a particular issue for the most vulnerable pupils, and the families most significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some noted the impact of poverty on pupil engagement and suggested that the poverty-related attainment gap is likely to have widened for some pupils despite the best efforts of schools.

It is far easier to work with identified pupils and ensure that they are learning when in school and face-to-face. Some of our poverty-affected families struggled to sustain engagement. For some, the gap will have widened despite all efforts made to maintain regular contact during school building closure. (PEF-only school in small town)

8.6. Headteachers also suggested that a lack of face-to-face contact was a challenge in terms of identifying and meeting parents' needs. These respondents noted the difficulty of maintaining meaningful engagement with parents by remote means.

Many parents are experiencing real difficulty – it is a delicate balance between asking for parental support and adding to an already difficult situation. We rely on regular face-to-face meetings and home visits to support vulnerable families to engage. A phone call is too easy to ignore and passing this on to social work colleagues feels (for the families) like an escalation. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

8.7. **Supporting pupil and family wellbeing** was also highlighted as a challenge by a substantial number of schools. This included reference to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of pupils and families, with some schools having struggled to respond to the increased volume of mental health needs. This included some reporting difficulties accessing specialist support services during the COVID-19 lockdown.

> *Apart from the teaching and learning aspect, it is also difficult for children who rely on the emotional and social support they have in school (and perhaps do not have at home). Our children were also affected by limited access to Educational Psychologists and Speech and Language services. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

8.8. Some schools also referred to concerns for the safety of pupils required to spend extended periods in the home environment, and the challenges in providing the full range of support required by some pupils.

> *With the children being at home it is very difficult to continue to support them - socially, emotionally and physically. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

8.9. In addition to challenges for pupil engagement in learning, the lack of face-to-face contact was also seen as limiting the ability of schools to provide necessary support to families. Some suggested that there are limits to the role of technology in supporting families, and that video calls, for example, are no substitute for in-person engagement.

> *Physically being able to support families who are really struggling. TEAMS has helped to engage with pupils, but it is not the same as being at school. (Challenge Authority school in rural area)*

8.10. Written comments also highlighted the central importance of teachers in providing support to pupils and families during school building closures. This included reference to a broad range of supports being provided, with some suggesting that teachers have been required to take on the role of specialist support providers in response to an increasing volume of support needs.

> *Teachers assumed the role of social worker during school building closures: dealing with domestic violence, financial poverty, delivering food and essentials to pupils and families, offering pastoral support to parents. (PEF-only school in urban area)*

8.11. **Other challenges** referenced by respondents included difficulties adapting approaches to remote learning, digital connectivity limiting engagement with remote learning, and pressure on staffing skills and capacity. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

8.12. Around a third of respondents provided comment in relation to how they had responded to the challenges of COVID-19 and school building closures, and in particular any creative solutions they wished to share. The main points raised by respondents are summarised below.

Table 15: Creative responses to the challenges of COVID-19 and school building closures (n=134)

Theme	% of comments
Maintaining communication, building relationships, pastoral care to pupils/families – including use of specific tools/resources	40%
Specific approaches and tools focused on wellbeing, nurture (including addressing the impact of deprivation)	23%
Ensuring a shared ethos and commitment across the school community	16%
Digital services and resources for learning	16%
Staff commitment, collaborative working, etc.	16%
Printed resources etc. for learning	13%
Targeting/engaging with specific groups, most vulnerable pupils/families	12%
Work with external services including community groups to provide additional support	7%
Staff skills development	6%
Tracking and feedback on attainment, progress	5%

8.13. Approaches to **maintain communication and build relationships** with pupils and families were the most commonly mentioned by these respondents. Some noted that they had dedicated significant resources to maintaining regular communication with pupils and families, including use of new technologies and tools to do so.

> *We have worked hard to maintain good communication with families. We provided resources to support families with digital learning, and check-in with families all the time during school building closure - it is so important that families do not feel isolated and have someone to talk to throughout these challenging times. Parents have appreciated*

the supports we can offer, and referral to other agencies. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

8.14. In addition to supporting remote learning, some also referred to the importance of ongoing communication in terms of providing the pastoral care required by the most vulnerable pupils and families. Some suggested that the positive relationships developed with families through regular communication had helped to develop the trust required to address wider support needs.

Regular pastoral calls to families and their children have really helped keep the connection between home and school. Showing empathy for families' circumstances has built trust and confidence. (PEF-only school in urban area)

During school building closures we have tried to be a support to all families. We have had an expectation of schoolwork but have made it clear that it is not to the detriment to the emotional health and well-being to everyone in the household. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

8.15. Some respondents also suggested that the focus on building communication and relationships with families supported their wider school ethos. This included examples of headteachers indicating that they had emerged from school building closures with a strengthened school ethos and sense of community.

I feel our school community has come through this situation with our vision for transformation strengthened. Our collaboration and commitment to good learning is heightened and staff are focused on improving the learning experiences. We have worked to support our families and there is an increased sense of community and trust. The partners who work directly with pupils provide support for families and the impact can be seen in the learners. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

8.16. Respondents also referred to a range of **approaches and tools with a focus on pupil and family wellbeing**. Specific approaches identified as having been effective included shared reading, family quizzes and other activities, and regular challenge activities. Some also noted the value of these approaches in fostering a sense of community amongst families, for example through sharing of photographs and experiences.

Staff members read bedtime stories – this was welcomed. We had family quizzes on Facebook, and weekly challenges which involved families and the local community. We have a parents webpage allowing parents to share photos of different activities. (PEF-only school in small town)

8.17. Schools also reflected on the effectiveness of 'champions' and 'ambassadors'. This included in terms of building capacity within schools to respond to mental health and wellbeing needs, and as identified contacts for pupils and families.

We have placed a significant focus on the mental health and wellbeing of our pupils. This included the appointment of a PT Wellbeing to champion both targeted and universal support for pupils. During periods of self-isolation pupils have been invited to virtual lunches and workouts with peers. Staff Wellbeing ambassadors have been trained and are active in the school as additional support for pupils. (Schools Programme school in small town)

8.18. Some schools indicated that their response to pupil and family wellbeing had involved a specific focus on supporting families experiencing deprivation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have sought to help families be more resilient. Our job has been to really target and support those who need the help to support themselves and their children. (PEF-only school in urban area)

8.19. A number of headteachers expressed a view that regular communication with families, and improved understanding of families' circumstances and needs, had been of fundamental importance to their overall approach to pupil engagement. These schools highlighted the extent to which improved communication had been an effective means of identifying support needs, enabling schools to engage more effectively with pupils.

Setting up a gardening club for parents and their children gave our families the opportunity to continue to be involved in the life of the school. It has also had a positive impact on their mental health and well-being; being outdoors, a sense of community and feeling that they were making a valuable contribution to the school. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)

> *I feel the focus on wellbeing was the best thing we did during the school building closure. This has been by far the biggest input into our recovery of learning levels and attainment so far. Focusing on families first as we can't learn if we don't feel safe and supported. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

8.20. Comments also highlighted a broad range of **other approaches to the challenges of COVID-19 and school building closures**. These included a particular focus on use of digital services and resources to support remote learning, including development of staff skills and capacity.

> *I am very proud of my teachers' efforts during school building closures. A teacher with advanced ICT skills was able to share this to enhance skills across all staff. We were able to take advantage of regular training opportunities which would not normally be possible. This meant we were in a very good place to deal with the second lockdown and provide what we can for our families. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

8.21. The approaches noted above in relation to maintaining communication with pupils were also seen as crucial in building a sense of belonging across the school community, even as school buildings remained closed. Schools also referred to associated benefits for pupil attendance and engagement.

> *Our focus on positive relationships enabled a sense of belonging to continue even though remotely. Our work in relation to attendance and engagement has given us scope to upscale thinking to best respond to our young people's and family needs. (PEF-only school in urban area)*

8.22. The strengthening of school communities was also highlighted in relation to the continuing development of a positive school ethos. Several headteachers referred to their school's shared ethos and values as vital elements in maintaining effective working relationships with pupils and families.

> *The school`s nurturing ethos and collegiate approach have stood us in good stead to tackle COVID-related challenges. Families have a good level of trust in the school and our approaches have been well received. (Challenge Authority school in urban area)*

8.23. The importance of staff input was highlighted across multiple aspects of schools' response to the challenges of COVID-19, and is also evident in the extent to which schools have used ASF support to increase staff skills and capacity. Written comments also reflected on the commitment and determination shown by teaching and support staff in responding to new challenges, and the extent to which schools' success has relied on staff 'going above and beyond'. This included in relation to working collaboratively to develop effective approaches, and taking the time required to engage meaningfully with pupils and families.

> *Staff commitment and determination stand out. Staff going above and beyond to engage with families, showing empathy and understanding. Staff taking time to problem solve, support, listen to and respond to the needs of our school community. As a school we have more of a focus on the mental health of staff, pupils and families. We hope this will help build our own resilience in dealing with recent challenges and support the resilience of our whole school community. (Challenge Authority school in small town)*

9. Concluding remarks

9.1. This report has presented findings from the fifth survey of headteachers of schools in receipt of support from the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF). The ASF supports the Scottish Attainment Challenge focus on improving literacy, numeracy, health and well-being of children adversely affected by poverty, and incorporates a number of specific strands to support schools to close the poverty-related gap in attainment and wellbeing.

9.2. The reduction in response rate to the fifth survey of headteachers (from 47% in 2019 to 27% in 2020) was in the context of survey fieldwork being undertaken during an unprecedented period of school building closures and associated pressure on schools. It is important to note that despite this reduction in response rate, the volume of responses is sufficient to produce robust results, and survey weighting has minimised the impact of any response bias.

9.3. Findings continue to demonstrate positive impacts being delivered with ASF support. Moreover, development of the survey evidence base over time shows a number of positive trends. For example, the 90% of respondents that have seen improvement in closing the poverty-related gap in literacy, numeracy or health and wellbeing represents a 12-point improvement since 2017. A large majority of respondents (88%) also expect further improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the next five years.

9.4. However, survey findings also make clear that schools have faced unique challenges during 2019/20. This is reflected in the 95% of headteachers indicating that COVID-19 and school building closures had at least some impact on their progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap – and 61% had seen a 'significant impact'. This appeared to be linked to the challenges faced by schools during the period of school building closures, including a lack of face-to-face contact with pupils, challenges supporting pupil and family wellbeing (particularly for increasing numbers affected by poverty), and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupils' and families' mental health.

9.5. There has also been a 10-point reduction in the proportion of respondents who expect to see further improvement in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the next few years (88%, down from 98% in 2019), and a minority (34%) feel the improvement they have made to date will be sustainable beyond funding. Views were more positive on sustaining the focus on equity in their school, but there remained concerns regarding potential loss of staff resources

post-funding, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has already had an adverse impact on the poverty-related attainment gap.

9.6. A number of key themes emerged across survey findings, which appear to have a particularly important bearing on schools' experience of closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and have been reflected in their response to the challenges associated with COVID-19.

9.7. These themes include specific factors that appear linked to progress achieved to date in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Survey findings indicate that the headteachers most likely to report improvement were those:

- who had **embedded approaches to ensuring equity** across the school community;
- who feel that they **understand the challenges faced by pupils** and parents affected by poverty;
- who feel that ASF has helped to develop **staff data and evidence skills**;
- who have seen an increase in collaborative working; and
- who feel they are effective in measuring progress and impact of approaches.

9.8. A number of wider themes were also evident, which had emerged in the specific context of school building closures, and which appear to influence schools' experience of ASF and their work to close the poverty-related attainment gap. These included the importance of:

- **maintaining communication with pupils and families** (improving understanding of family circumstances and needs, tailoring the school approach accordingly, and signposting to other supports);
- **better understanding of the challenges affecting pupils and families** including an **increasing focus on wellbeing and mental health** (reflecting increasing numbers of families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and requiring support, and the positive impact of improved family wellbeing for pupil engagement); and
- **ensuring a shared ethos and values across the school community** (supported by effective communication with pupils and families, and demonstrated by the commitment of school staff in responding to the significant challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic).

9.9. These themes were highlighted by headteachers in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic and school building closures. However, survey responses indicate that they will continue to inform work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, with written comments providing examples of schools already planning recovery from COVID-19.

9.10. Headteachers also highlighted the particular importance of ongoing communication and engagement with families. This included suggestions that this engagement facilitates other aspects of schools' response to school building closures, such as securing a better understanding of barriers affecting pupils and families (and tailoring approaches accordingly) and maintaining a shared culture and ethos. Written responses suggest that communication and engagement will continue to be a crucial element for schools.

Annex 1: Acronyms used

ASF	Attainment Scotland Fund
ASN	Additional Support Needs
BGE	Broad General Education
CA	Challenge Authority
PEF	Pupil Equity Fund
SAC	Scottish Attainment Challenge
SIMD	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
SP	Schools Programme

social research

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