

# Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation - Families and Communities Thematic Evaluation Report, 2024



**CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

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## **Executive Summary**

**Learning does not start nor stop at the school gates, and some of the factors that can influence the outcomes of children and young people are in the family and community.**

In recognition of this, school engagement with families and communities has been a key feature of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Evaluation evidence shows a developing picture of engagement with and support for families and communities over the years of the Evaluation. From an early focus on interventions to the development of local authority wide approaches, there is an evolving picture of support.

This report presents evidence from the Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) to show how approaches to family and community engagement have developed and been embedded in schools and local authorities as a result of funding.

### **A thematic approach to evaluation**

The Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) was established to provide learning about the overall implementation of the Fund and the extent to which progress has been made towards the outcomes of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

A refreshed approach to the Evaluation was developed in 2022, which included a thematic strand of evaluation, designed to respond to emerging system priorities and to consider 'what works, for whom and in what circumstances'. Based on input from the ASF Evaluation Advisory Panel, three initial thematic areas were prioritised: Families & Communities; Readiness to Learn; and, Children and Young People's Voice.

### **The evaluation of ASF approaches to family and community engagement**

From the early stages of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, we have highlighted that interventions to support families and communities and engagement strategies have increased over the years to a point where they are considered a priority for schools. This includes the provision of targeted support for families, the role of school/family development workers focusing on wider support for children and families, improving attendance, engagement and participation, and supporting family learning. Over time a shift from a range of individual school level interventions to wider and more systematically planned 'approaches' at the local authority level was apparent.

The impact of the pandemic, and subsequent school building closures, widened and intensified the need for and provision of family and community engagement and support, at the same time as evolving the ways in which it was delivered. There is considerable evidence of an expansion of some services and a pivot towards increased direct contact and support for families during the COVID-19 pandemic,

particularly the two periods of school building closures and remote learning. Themes which emerged in this period include:

- **Increased partnership working** with families, parent's groups, the third sector and with other local authority services.
- **Schools working directly to facilitate increased contact with families**, with provision of food, materials to support home-learning, and face to face 'welfare' visits etc.
- **The role of family/link workers**, often funded through PEF, were highlighted. For a number of local authorities, existing family link worker roles enabled a rapid response to the challenges facing families, often working in partnership with third sector organisations to respond to changing circumstances of families.

### **Current initiatives and approaches to family and community engagement**

A survey of Scottish Attainment Challenge Leads in local authorities was undertaken by Scottish Government analysts in 2023 which included a focus on families and communities, while Education Scotland Attainment Advisors collected evidence around families and communities for a National Summary Report that was published in early 2024. The combined evidence from these sources shows:

- Nearly all local authorities which responded to the SAC Leads Survey considered families and communities a strategic priority for their local authority in relation to their approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge.
- Most local authorities currently have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families, often driven by parental involvement and engagement strategies.
- The important role of family link workers, particularly their ability to reach families and engage meaningfully with them.

### **Summary of evidence**

Based on the Evaluation evidence, it is apparent that local authorities have utilised the Attainment Scotland Fund to support approaches to engaging with and supporting families and communities to the extent that we can evidence an embedding of these approaches. This evidence includes strategic approaches that most local authorities have put in place to support engagement with parents/carers and families. There is evidence that family link workers and similar roles and teams have had considerable impact universally and on those who have been targeted for example in terms of strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and the resultant increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils (and their families). Local authorities and schools recognise that close relationships and tailored, meaningful support is critical in their work to close the poverty related attainment gap.

## Introduction

This report focuses on an aspect of thematic evaluation which was developed as a priority focus in the later years of the initial Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) evaluation, which explores engaging with and support for families and communities.

The report aims to present evidence from the Evaluation over the years since the Fund's inception and tell the story of how engagement with, and support for, families and communities became a key focus for ASF funding, along with considering the evidence in relation to the ASF Evaluation questions. This report assesses that Evaluation evidence points to an embedding of this support, resulting in impacts with positive outcomes for children and young people, their families and their communities.

## Evaluation Background

With the launch of the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge and its new mission in 2022, a new [Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model](#), the result of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, was published. This contained two new outcome areas - readiness to learn and children and young peoples voice in decision making, reflecting the importance of these areas to the Programme. These thematic areas along with families and communities form the three areas of thematic focus for the Evaluation in 2022/23.

Following on from the SAC refreshed Programme and publication of the Logic Model, the new [Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Strategy 2022-26](#) was developed. The new Evaluation Strategy identified families and communities as a priority focus, along with readiness to learn and children and young people's voice in decision making. The consideration of a range of thematic areas is an integral part of the new Evaluation Strategy, allowing an in-depth focus on collaboratively agreed key areas of enquiry.<sup>1</sup> These aspects of thematic evaluation will seek to provide learning and increase the evidence base on 'what works and what could be improved, for whom, and in what circumstances.' It allows the Evaluation to continue to explore the theme of engagement with, and support for, families and communities in the context of the ASF and to gather evidence related to Evaluation question 8, and the related sub-evaluation questions, as set out in table 1 below.

Table 1: ASF Evaluation: Families and Communities Evaluation Question and Sub-questions

Evaluation question:	Sub-evaluation questions:
Evaluation Question 8: To	

<sup>1</sup> Priority areas of thematic focus for the Evaluation identified and agreed by the internal Evaluation Working Group and the Evaluation Advisory Panel.

<p>what extent has the fund embedded engagement with and support for families and communities?</p>	<p>What has been learned about engaging with families and communities through the ASF?</p> <p>What are the emerging impacts of engagement with families and communities as a result of the ASF? (e.g. improved understanding of families' circumstances and additional support needs; improved understanding of local context)</p> <p>What were the views of wider stakeholders (children and young people, families and communities, and third sector organisations) of approaches to engagement with and support for families and communities?</p>
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Families and communities are to an extent a broad umbrella area of thematic focus and it is important to acknowledge the interconnections between the three current thematic areas. For example, initiatives focused on supporting and engaging with families often involve activities that support improving attendance and engagement (readiness to learn) and seeking families' and communities' participation in decision making (children and young peoples voice in decision making). The [main summary report](#) seeks to highlight these interconnections and cross cutting themes.

Families and communities were formally identified as a priority focus for the evaluation of the ASF 2020-21 academic year (ASF Year 6 report). The enquiry yielded important insights into support and engagement with families and communities in the context of the ASF, such as the important role of family learning and family outreach work such as family link workers and associated teams, and the importance of effective links with wider partners both in the public and third sector. <sup>2</sup> This is explored in further detail below.

The focus in ASF Year 6 (2020/21) evaluation informed the development of the sub-evaluation questions related to Evaluation Question 8. Two of the sub-questions were utilised in the previous evaluation and therefore are a direct continuation of these areas of focus.

The third sub-question related to the views of wider stakeholders reflects the greater focus on views of children, young people, families and communities, and

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<sup>2</sup> As highlighted in the [ASF Year 6 evaluation report](#).

third sector organisations across the evaluation in the new Evaluation Strategy. In this case with regard to approaches to engaging with and supporting families and communities. This is a key link across to the thematic evaluation strand children and young peoples voice in decision making.

## **Evaluation Evidence – Initial years of the Attainment Scotland Fund (2015- 2020)**

The use of ASF funding to support families and communities has been a developing area over the years of the Fund. In order to tell the story of support for and engagement with families and communities it is important to consider the evaluation evidence over the years of the Fund and to highlight the emerging themes. In this section analysis will be presented from years 1-6 of the Evaluation, predominantly using the annual retrospective Evaluation Reports as source material. This consideration is helpful to seek to answer Evaluation Question 8:

### **To what extent has the fund embedded engagement with and support for families and communities?**

In the initial years of the fund, the [Evaluation Report years 1-2](#), highlighted family support and engagement as part of a range of interventions taking place funded through the ASF by local authorities and schools, although this was to a lesser extent than the priority areas of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Initially this was apparent through the interventions that were focused on family support and engagement and family learning.<sup>3</sup>

The Headteacher Survey responses in year 2 reported that 30% of headteachers said that the work (to close the poverty related attainment gap) at school could be undermined by disengaged parents, citing this as a perceived barrier to the success of the Fund, highlighting that this was an area that required further focus going forward. The [Evaluation Report for Year 3](#) similarly noted a focus on a range of interventions related to leadership, parental engagement/families and communities, and data analysis. Whilst there were references to families and communities at this stage of the Evaluation there was not a dedicated consideration of this area.

The [Year 4 \(2018/19\) Evaluation Report](#) noted a focus on parental and family engagement forming a key part of the approaches developed in some schools. This included, for example, approaches aimed at supporting pupil attendance and engagement, and improving pupil aspirations. The report notes evidence from the Headteacher Survey 2019 which pointed to the need for a clear commitment to parental engagement, and recognition of the time required to build relationships with families, not least given negative associations with the school environment which may be held by some parents. There was also evidence of the benefits of parental engagement, such as parents being more willing to engage with school activities and viewing the school as a source of help and support. Also noted were

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<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund - interim report (Years 1 and 2), published March 2018

instances of good practice sharing between local authorities regarding Family Link Worker interventions.

When considering approaches to engaging families and communities the [Year 5 \(2019/20\) Evaluation Report](#) notes that there was considerable evidence of the ongoing development of approaches to engaging families and communities across all evidence sources used in the Report. Evidence from the Local Authority Survey 2020 indicates that the majority of respondents developed their approaches to engaging families and communities during the previous year.

The Report notes that during the period August 2019 to March 2020, there were numerous developments in engaging families and communities. For example, local authorities described the development of parental involvement and engagement strategies, and of approaches to family learning. Challenge Authority progress reports detailed a whole range of ways in which local authorities had sought to support children and young people through projects to support families, including provision of targeted support for families, the role of school/family development workers focusing on improving attendance, engagement and participation, and parenting support such as benefits advice, mental health, substance misuse etc, pointing to the holistic nature of much of this activity. It is important to note that a move from employment of a range of interventions to the consideration of wider and more systematically planned 'approaches' (local authority wide strategies or initiatives) was apparent.

Year 5 (2019/20) can be considered a year of two halves – pre and post COVID-19 pandemic. The next section considers the COVID-19 impacts and resultant developments in support and engagement with families and communities.

### **Impact of School Building Closures and new approaches**

The [Year 5 \(2019/20\) Evaluation Report](#) shows the evaluation continuing to tell the 'story' of change and adaptation which occurred throughout the course of the 2019/20 year as a result of the period of school building closures from March to June 2020 due to the COVID -19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted on how local authorities engaged with and supported families and communities and how they utilised ASF Funding to do this – this is a pivotal period in terms of understanding the families and communities' thematic area.

The Report notes that whilst some family and community engagements and supports were driven forward at pace, responding to impacts of the pandemic, some planned aspects had to be paused or changed due to the school building closures. Adaptations included the development of virtual approaches. The Year 5 Evaluation Report notes that work at the local authority level progressed on a more limited level during the school building closures, whilst at the school level engagement with families and communities increased.

Themes which emerged with regard to the period of school building closures include:



- **Increased partnership working**, both with parents' groups, with third sector and with other local authority services.
- **Schools working directly to facilitate increased contact with families**, with provision of food, hard copy materials to support home-learning, face to face 'welfare' visits etc.
- **The role of family/link workers**, often funded through PEF, were highlighted. For a number of local authorities, existing family link worker roles enabled a rapid response to the challenges facing families, often working in partnership with third sector organisations to respond to changing circumstances of families as a result of the ongoing pandemic. Family/link workers were viewed as key as they were able to use their existing knowledge of families and existing relationships with families to engage quickly to start to address their needs, including direct provision to support Health and Wellbeing needs (e.g. delivery of food parcels, clothes), signposting to other services including benefits advice, food banks, and linking with other statutory and non-statutory services in the local area.

The [Year 6 ASF Evaluation Report](#) published in June 2022 and covering a retrospective evaluation of the 2020-21 academic year provides a key point to consider a larger body of focused evidence. At this point the thematic area of Families and communities took on significance in the Evaluation as an agreed area of priority focus based on emerging evidence in previous years. A specific Evaluation question and sub questions were developed. Engaging families and communities emerged as a strong focus in local authority and school approaches to closing the poverty-related attainment gap and given the new priority focus there is a considerable body of evidence to support this view.

Two key evidence sources, the Local Authority Survey and the Headteacher Survey, both included specific questions related to approaches to engaging families and communities and specific questions seeking to capture information on COVID-19 impacts. Table 2 below notes how Families and Communities theme was incorporated into research instruments.

Table 2: ASF Year 6 Evaluation Survey Instruments incorporating Families and Communities

ASF Year 6 Local Authority survey	Included a section on engaging families and communities and a supplementary question about any learning that emerged from the approach to engaging families and communities in the second period of school building closures (e.g. role of link workers; check-ins with families; provision of food and other essential supplies; signposting; remote
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	learning support).
ASF Year 6 Headteacher survey	Included a range of questions related to engaging families and communities. This included related to new circumstances affecting families.

There was considerable evidence of the ongoing development of approaches to engaging families and communities across evidence sources in the Year 6 evaluation report and important to note that the Evaluation was adapted to gather evidence related to COVID-19 (a year of COVID-19 related disruption with the second period of school building closures between January and April 2021).

All respondents to the Local Authority Survey 2021, indicated that their local authority approach to engaging families and communities had developed over the previous year. This was broadly consistent with the previous year, with the 2020 survey evidence showing that the majority of respondents developed their approaches to engaging families and communities during the 2019/20 year. Evidence from the Headteacher Survey 2021 indicates that the great majority of survey respondents had used engagement with families and communities as part of their school's approach to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Year 6 Report highlights that the Headteacher Survey 2021 invited schools to describe how their approach to family and community engagement had developed in 2020/21, particularly during the period of school building closures. As with the 2020 survey, we can see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with the most common approach for schools reported as developing family and community engagement through increased use of 'outreach' communication with families. The benefit of this increased contact with families is reported as both to build relationships and to improve their understanding and identification of circumstances and needs.

The Report notes that the use of digital resources and platforms was also used as part of engagement strategies with families by a substantial number of respondents. This included increased use of social media for communication and engagement, as well as use of digital resources and platforms to support schools maintain frequent and more 'continuous' communication with families.

A tailored approach of engagement with and support for the most vulnerable families was also highlighted as a key aspect for some respondents. A range of communication options, including telephone, video messages and social media had been employed, and engagement approaches such as surveys and virtual sessions

on a range of issues including health and wellbeing, mindfulness, family quizzes and other online social events.

The changing circumstances affecting families as a result of COVID-19 in 2020-21 were also reported in the Year 6 evaluation report. Nearly all (99%) headteacher respondents to the Headteacher Survey 2021 felt that pupils and/or parents in need of support with mental health and emotional wellbeing had become more common since school building closures, including 78% who felt this had become 'much more' common. Whilst other circumstances were also highlighted as affecting an increasing number of families - including difficulties accessing support services due to COVID-19, families struggling with remote learning, digital connectivity issues and pupils and/or parents needing support with physical health and wellbeing – the increase in mental health needs was the most commonly identified issue.

A wide range of adaptations to approaches in response to the new circumstances outlined above were referenced by headteachers in the Headteacher Survey 2021. These adaptations included:

- a greater focus on mental health.
- more support for remote learning and digital connectivity.
- additional staffing skills and capacity.
- and additional support for parents and families such as helping them access financial support, access to food and clothes etc.

From the Headteacher Survey 2021 important examples of learning around engaging with families and communities in the context of COVID-19 emerged. This included:

- the importance of family learning/family link workers and teams.
- effective links to wider partnerships.
- opportunities for online communication.
- need for meaningful engagement and challenging assumptions of what support families may need.

Evidence emerged of the impact of specific roles to support engagement with families, as well as a broader range of emerging impacts including:

- strengthened relationships with families and communities.
- increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils and families; increased supports in place for families affected by poverty; a greater appreciation of the role schools can play.
- and a greater focus on pupil attendance and engagement.

In the Headteacher Survey 2021, headteachers were asked their views of the main learning points arising from their engagement with families and communities over the previous year. Most commonly cited was the value of proactive communication and approaches to maintain engagement with families. Headteachers' responses also suggested their experiences of family engagement had highlighted the important role of the home learning environment and parents' capacity to support pupils' learning. The importance of digital skills and connectivity - including support to families to ensure they can make effective use of digital resources - and the increased role that schools have played providing support to pupils and families, have highlighted the importance of building positive relationships built on trust. This was a factor which was suggested to have led to more families turning to schools for support.

In terms of the Local Authority Survey 2021, themes from local authority responses suggested there had been key learning around engaging with families and communities in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:

- The important role of family learning and family link workers and associated teams.
- The importance of effective links with wider partners both in public and third sector.
- The importance of continuing to learn from current experiences in terms of engagement with families and communities and to refine approaches accordingly. For example, one local authority (in receipt of Schools Programme funding) highlighted that it had established a working group to look at how better to support family engagement across the local authority using learning which had emerged from current practice.
- The options provided through digital solutions to communicate and consult with parents, with some respondents pointing to evidence suggesting that some families found online communication (including parent/carer evenings) more beneficial with the potential for increasing 'reach'.
- The need for meaningful engagement with families, and for challenging assumptions around what families may need in terms of support:

“What we learned during this time was not to assume what that support was, how it was to be delivered and when it was required. A big lesson was to ensure we engaged in a meaningful way with communities and families to hear their voice in this and to give all community members the opportunity not only to say and shape what the support was but also to contribute to the provision of that support - much more about 'working with' and much less about 'doing to'.” (PEF-only local authority)

Exemplar: School and Family Development Workers in primary schools School and Family Development Workers appointed to work in primary schools across one Challenge Authority were providing links to third sector providers and a gateway to other services and funding streams. The post-holders had engaged in many

aspects of delivery such as: 'foodbanks, linked families and schools, ensured access to learning for the most vulnerable and also supported with family learners.

Emerging impacts of engaging with families and communities were also identified through responses to the Local Authority Survey 2021. These included for example:

- A greater appreciation of the role of schools in providing support to children, young people and their families impacted by poverty.
- Evidence of increased supports in place for families affected by poverty and improved understanding of systems/processes and of supports which can be provided to families and communities.
- Strengthened relationships with families and communities and increased awareness of the importance of ongoing relationships and of mechanisms such as regular check-ins to continue to build and support relationships.
- Increased awareness of the importance of signposting to other services when additional support was required.

A number of local authority respondents pointed to the impact of specific roles to support engagement with families, some examples of which are provided below:

- One local authority respondent highlighted family learning assistants in primary schools leading to greater engagement of families and increased signposting to specialist services.
- Another local authority respondent pointed to the role of Pupil Support Officers (PSOs) to support mental health of families with the aim of improving engagement and attendance of pupils. This was associated with positive impacts on young people and their families and their engagement and attendance at school.
- Early successes with individual families participating in specific family centred approaches provided through partnerships between a local authority and relevant third sector organisations were also described by a local authority respondent.

It is clear that the evaluation evidence shows a developing picture of engagement with and support for families and communities over the years of the Evaluation. From an early focus on interventions to the development of wider approaches and then the priority approaches developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated learning that they provided. There is considerable evidence of an expansion of some services and a pivot towards increased direct contact and support for families during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the two periods of school building closures and remote learning.

With the development of the new ASF Evaluation Strategy in 2022, a key output in year 1 was the survey of Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads. The next section presents key findings on families and communities from the analysis of survey responses.

## Evidence on families and communities theme 2022/23

### SAC Leads Survey 2022/23 – Analysis of Thematic Questions

The SAC Local Authority Leads Survey 2022/23<sup>4</sup> was extended to include a focus on the three thematic aspects of evaluation focus for 2022/23, (readiness to learn, families and communities, children and young peoples engagement in decision making) as outlined in the ASF Evaluation Strategy 2022-26 and ASF Evaluation Year 1 Analytical Plan 2022/23. This provides important evidence of current activity in relation to support for and engagement with families and communities, which is clearly an area of continued focus for local authorities.

It is important to highlight that survey responses show strong interconnections between the thematic areas, with initiatives focused on supporting and engaging with families often involving activities that support improving attendance and engagement (readiness to learn) and involving families and communities in decision making and participation. It was apparent from survey responses that comments highlight both a focus on specific aspects but also the inter-linked nature of the three thematic areas under consideration.

The survey findings show that nearly all local authorities which responded considered that families and communities was a strategic priority for their local authority in relation to their approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Additionally, local authority respondents considered that ASF was supporting the development of approaches to families and communities in their local authority.

Survey respondents highlight a range of ways ASF is being used to support the development of approaches to families and communities. This included:

- Home Link Team 'working across all education group localities to support our families and communities through iLunch<sup>5</sup>, parental empowerment and engagement programmes'.
- One Local Authority noted that they have invested in Family Engagement Workers, and this is also supported by an Empowering Clusters model (groupings of schools to work together and support families) and new Community Hubs.
- Local Authority noted that they have developed an Early Engagement team which provides targeted support for those children and families in greatest need of support.

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<sup>4</sup> The survey was live from 11 May to 12 June 2023 and received 19 responses from across the 32 local authorities. A set of thematic questions were included in the survey. This included both closed and open questions.

<sup>5</sup> Lunchtime initiative for families and communities.

- Local authority highlighted a range of roles such as Engagement Officer and pupil support officers providing support across establishments.
- Funding to employ additional school and family development workers across local authority primary schools.
- CLD Family Learning Officers working across the local authority with a range of support and initiatives.
- Partnership working with CLD to ensure interventions focused on 'engaging families in learning interventions' (led to positive impact children and families). This has included activities both in and out of school hours for targeted families.
- Engaging with and supporting families: 'family link staff are integral to many schools using PEF funding'.
- The impact of community work with Parent Empowerment groups established in localities across the local authority noted as key in terms of engagement and attendance:

'.... our community work has been impactful, with the setting up and subsequent self-led continuation of several Parental Empowerment groups across localities in the local authority. Engagement of our families and communities is ensuring those at risk of missing out through lack of attendance and engagement have raised expectations at home and thus improved outcomes are experienced'. (LA Response)

One local authority highlighted that their focus on the thematic areas emerges not only through ASF but also through the core work of the local authority, however they did acknowledge the impact of additional funding through the ASF as supporting such a focus:

'The additional finance received and deployed through ASF streams supports significant levels of development in teams such as Home Link Workers and our Inclusion interventions, where we work with children and young people with complex needs to reengage with learning. This work is ongoing and ASF will once again be deployed in 2023/4 to continue to improve our approaches in these areas.' A local authority described its focus on partnership, leadership and use of data and evidence, specifically focusing on the Barnardo's Family Support Worker service as an example of how ASF is supporting two of the three thematic areas (families and communities and pupil/parent voice):

'Supporting families and communities is a theme that is evident through the partnership with Barnardo's where bespoke interventions support children and families to have improved engagement and readiness to learn. The matrix used by Barnardo's ensures interventions are tracked and monitored for impact. Pupil and family voice is essential in the success of this approach. Within the local Authority there are various mechanisms for ensuring pupil and families voices are heard which impact planning and decision making. Further improvements around the

effectiveness of pupil and family voice in the planning and evaluation of the funded interventions will be explored in the coming session.'

Several other local authorities noted that they could not sustain the focus on this area without the investment of ASF. One respondent provided a substantive comment related to the appointment of Education Attainment Workers (EAWs) via PEF and support worker post via CECYP providing insights in terms of how they viewed ASF was supporting these areas of focus in their local authority. They noted that ASF 'allowed for significant support to be provided to help children be more ready to learn'.

## **Evidence from Education Scotland's National Summary Report 4 – Focus on Families and Communities 2022/23**

Education Scotland National Summary Reports are part of the cycle for reporting on the implementation and delivery of the mission of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC). Attainment Advisors, work with their local authority, to produce reports triannually. The theme for National Summary Report 4 was families and communities and focuses on three key areas: parental engagement, collaboration and cost of the school day. Education Scotland note that Families and communities is one of the key drivers for change in delivering the Scottish Attainment Challenge

The National Summary Reports are a key evidence source considered for this thematic review. The reports have been analysed against the Evaluation key enquiry areas as set out in the sub-evaluation questions.

### **Engaging with families and communities – emerging impacts**

#### **Strategic Approaches**

The National Summary Report highlights that most local authorities have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families. In the majority of these, parental engagement has been a real focus across a variety of cross-sector plans, policies and frameworks. Many local authorities have in place a parental involvement and engagement strategy (PIES) the development of which have been supported by the publication of Education Scotland's [Strategic Framework for Parental Engagement, Family Learning and Learning at Home](#) in October 2022, and its official launch in May 2023. The Triennial Report notes that half of the local authorities reported that their parental involvement and engagement strategies (PIES) were being developed or under review.

#### **Specific Support – Home link workers etc**

The Report notes that almost all local authorities have staff with specific roles to support children, young people and their families. Most local authorities are using Attainment Scotland Funding to employ, for example, home link workers, family link workers, family learning teams/workers, community workers etc. This can be at both a strategic level, used across the whole authority, and/or school level. At school level, the Report notes that Pupil Equity Funding is used to create bespoke roles to ensure that the needs of the families in their specific situations and local



contexts are met. The Report notes that there is strong evidence that the combined work and support from these roles or teams has had a considerable impact universally and for those who have been targeted.

Examples of the emerging impact of specific roles and teams supporting children, young people and their families:

- A local authority using PEF to support a team of family liaison/health and wellbeing officers working across 15 establishments attributed (in school improvement and pupil equity fund reporting) the work of this team having a positive impact on vulnerable pupils and families in terms of school attendance and engagement.
- A local authority using PEF in over forty schools to employ family support worker and other support staff to work directly with families to support learning and re-engagement. This has resulted positively on family and learner engagement and improved attendance.
- Families impacted by poverty are assisted by the attainment challenge funded Barnardo's Family Support Workers. A joint needs analysis determines bespoke support. This has led to improved mental health, improved relationships between parent and child, and financial signposting to ensure all benefits that are available are received.
- A local authority has employed home school link workers (HSLWs) to support the engagement of families. The majority of HSLWs are employed via PEF. HSLWs have an appropriate focus on equity. The majority are aware of and sensitive to family socio-economic circumstances, challenges and barriers. In almost all cases this has resulted in positive relationships with families based on trust and respect. As a result, an increased number of parents and carers are confident to engage with schools in supporting their children's learning.

### **Collaboration and partnerships**

The Report notes that local authorities engage with other services and partners to varying degrees to provide specific support roles for families and to support family learning opportunities. Highlighting that this is through partnership agreements and that where these agreements exist, they are most commonly with Community Learning and Development (CLD) services and target families living in poverty.

It is noted that a few local authorities promote partnerships and processes through family engagement policies or frameworks to ensure the widest possible reach. The most successful examples are where strategies and frameworks have been developed in collaboration with parents and representative bodies.

In addition, the Report notes the following:

- The majority of local authorities have agreements with third sector partners which support family learning. These include for example Barnardo's, Save the Children, Motivation, Commitment and Resilience Pathways, Mentors in Violence Prevention, and other local organisations.

- Partnerships with the NHS and allied health professionals support the wellbeing of both parents and children. A reduction in stress, better skills acquisition, a better understanding of children's learning and more willingness to approach schools when there is a problem are among the positive impacts of these partnerships.
- A few other collaborations to support family learning were highlighted in a minority of authorities. These included approaches to support refugees and engagement with the Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). Input from the RIC has been used to build capacity to deliver a particular programme in secondary schools.

### **Views of wider stakeholders (children and young people, families and communities, and third sector organisations) of approaches to engagement with and support for families and communities**

The Report notes that some local authorities outlined consultation with parents and stakeholders when reviewing and producing their parental involvement and engagement strategy (PIES). Others said that further work is required to involve and engage parents and families when establishing a shared vision.

Examples of incorporating the views of wider stakeholders reported in the National Summary Report are noted below:

- A local authority notes that its parental engagement strategy was formulated through a consultative process involving various stakeholders, including parents.
- Local authority reported that parental engagement strategy has been developed by a steering group of parents, pupils, teaching and early learning centre staff, taking account of national and local priorities. This has an appropriate focus on equity.
- Local authority noted that Headteachers, Parent Council chairs, wider school and parent forums took part in a consultation prior to the refresh of this strategy. The majority of participants felt that areas identified for improvement reflected their experiences and that the aims and principles were appropriate.
- The local authority has a highly valued 'Parental Engagement and Involvement Strategy'. This is reviewed regularly by parents/carers, headteachers and stakeholders. The strategy explicitly addresses equity through a focus of reducing barriers for specific groups of parents. Regular meetings are held with parent forums. An Equalities Parent Forum has been created to encourage full involvement of all parent groups, ensuring that equal rights are promoted.
- Local authority reports that parents/carers were active participants in the development of the strategy and have since gone on to develop a guide for Parent Councils. The guiding aim of the strategy is to 'get it right for every child' with the focus on supporting parents/carers to be active participants in their children's education.

The Education Scotland National Summary Report concludes that the ASF is being used effectively by local authorities and their schools to support families and communities. Of particular note is the use of funding for specific roles such as home link workers and engagement officers. The Report also recommends that when local authorities are planning and developing supports for families and communities that 'they ensure that strategies/policies/frameworks have been developed with children, young people and their families, including those with lived experience of poverty'.

## Summary

- Support for and engagement with families and communities involves a range of activity funded by ASF. This ranges from specific initiatives, specialist staffing to local authority wide engagement strategies. Families and communities support and engagement spans a range of activities with clear crossover with the readiness to learn thematic area, for example in terms of specific attendance initiatives and voice in relation to participatory budgeting initiatives. It is important to note a move from employment of a range of interventions in the initial years of the ASF to the more recent consideration of wider and more systematically planned 'approaches' (local authority wide strategies or initiatives).
- The evaluation evidence shows a developing picture of engagement with and support for families and communities over the years of the Evaluation. From an early focus on interventions to the development of wider approaches there is an evolving picture of support. Support and engagement activities include parental involvement strategies and approaches to family learning. Also, a range of other initiatives and approaches such as the important role of schools/family development or link workers who often work towards supporting school attendance, engagement, and participation as well as wider support to parents and carers around benefits advice and signposting to other services.
- It is clear from the evidence that support for and engagement with families and communities has gained increasing importance over the years of the Fund with local authorities and schools recognising that close relationships and tailored, meaningful support is critical in their work to close the poverty related attainment gap. Evidence highlights that most local authorities currently have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families. It is important to note that the expansion of work in this area is both about the development of approaches over the years of the Fund - e.g. family learning/family link workers and teams and the developments in support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic and the learning that emerged from that period.
- From 2019/20 onwards we can see the priority approaches developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated learning that they provided. There is considerable evidence of an expansion of some services and a pivot towards increased direct contact and support for families during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the two periods of school building closures and

remote learning in 2020 and 2021. While some services were expanded others were decreased or paused and included: the importance of family learning/family link workers and teams; effective links to wider partnerships; opportunities for online communication; need for meaningful engagement and challenging assumptions of what support families may need. A greater appreciation of the role schools can play, and a greater focus on pupil attendance and engagement. The impact of this expansion can be seen with local authorities reporting strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils.

- There is evidence of a consolidation of learning in the post COVID-19 period with evidence collected through the most recent Evaluation enquiry<sup>6</sup> highlighting that there is a focus on making adaptations based on learning and that nearly all local authorities considered families and communities a strategic priority (in relation to their approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge).

**Key learning points highlighted in the Evaluation evidence include the following:**

- Evidence highlights that most local authorities currently have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families. This is often driven by parental involvement and engagement strategies.
- The important role of family link workers and their ability to reach families, engage meaningfully with them and their ability to provide the relevant support required depending on local context. There is evidence that these roles or teams have had considerable impact universally and for those targeted, for example in terms of strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and the resultant increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils.
- Local authorities' experiences of family engagement highlighted the important role of the home learning environment and parents' capacity to support pupils' learning.
- The importance of building positive relationships built on trust. Local authorities noted this as a factor which can lead to more families turning to schools for support, particularly during the period of COVID-19 School building closures.

Learning suggests that impactful approaches involve the following:

- Importance of meaningful and proactive engagement with families and maintaining this over time.

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<sup>6</sup> Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation SAC Leads Survey, 2023

- Importance of effective links, collaboration, and joint working with wider public and third sector partners.
- Importance of continuing to learn from ongoing experiences of engaging with families and communities to refine and improve engagement and supports accordingly.

Annex A outlines the Evaluation sub-evaluation questions in turn and provides a progress 'stock take' on the basis of the evidence considered to date.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the Evaluation evidence, it is apparent that local authorities have utilised the Attainment Scotland Fund to support approaches to engaging with and supporting families and communities to the extent that we can evidence an embedding of these approaches. This evidence includes strategic approaches that most local authorities have put in place to support engagement with parents/carers and families. There is evidence that family link workers and similar roles and teams have had considerable impact universally and on those who have been targeted for example in terms of strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and the resultant increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils (and their families). Local authorities and schools recognise that close relationships and tailored, meaningful support is critical in their work to close the poverty related attainment gap.

## Annex A – Progress ‘stock take’ of evidence in relation to Evaluation sub-questions

In considering each of the sub-evaluation questions in turn, the following observations are offered on the basis of the evidence considered to date:

Evaluation Question	Summary of evidence
<p>What has been learned about engaging with families and communities through the ASF?</p>	<p>Developing story of increased engagement and support over the years of the Fund. It is important to note a move from employment of a range of interventions to the consideration of wider and more systematically planned ‘approaches’ (local authority wide strategies or initiatives) was apparent. Evidence highlights that most local authorities currently have strategic approaches in place to support engagement with parents and families. This is most often driven by parental involvement and engagement strategies.</p> <p>Evidence from Headteacher Survey and Local Authority Survey highlight how important meaningful engagement and focused support is with families with an increased focus on this area being evident over the years of the Programme.</p> <p>It is clear from the evidence that support for and engagement with families and communities has gained increasing importance over the years of the Fund with local authorities and schools recognising that close relationships and tailored, meaningful support is critical in their work to close the poverty related attainment gap. It is important to note that the expansion of work in this area is both about the development of approaches over the years of the Fund - e.g. family learning/family link workers and teams, family learning approaches and also with what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic and the learning that emerged from that period.</p>
<p>What are the emerging impacts of</p>	<p>There is strong evidence that family link workers and related teams have had considerable impact</p>

<p>engagement with families and communities as a result of the ASF? (e.g. improved understanding of families' circumstances and additional support needs; improved understanding of local context)</p>	<p>universally and for those specifically targeted with local authorities reporting strengthened relationships between schools and with families and communities and increased awareness within schools of poverty and its impact on pupils. The benefit of schools increased contact with families is reported to build relationships and improve their understanding and identification of circumstances and needs.</p> <p>Supporting and engaging with families and communities has shown the following positive impacts which includes a reduction in children and parents/carers stress, better skills acquisition, and a better understanding of children's learning and more willingness to approach schools when there is a problem. There is also evidence of positive impacts on attendance and engagement.</p> <p>The important role of the home learning environment and parents' capacity to support pupils' learning is also highlighted in the evidence.</p>
<p>What were the views of wider stakeholders (children and young people, families and communities, and third sector organisations) of approaches to engagement with and support for families and communities?</p>	<p>Evidence shows that all local authorities engage with other services and partners to varied degrees and there is evidence of a range of partnership agreements.</p> <p>Evidence that many local authorities work closely with children and young people and families and communities to develop local authority wide engagement strategies. Evidence of consultation and ongoing dialogue.</p> <p>The majority of local authorities have agreements with third sector partners and wider partnerships supporting this work with families and communities.</p> <p>An area for ongoing thematic focus (Voice) - including the views of third sector organisations.</p>



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