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Pupils' performance getting better, yet still wide variations across councils

Educational attainment is improving overall in Scotland, but there is a need to close the gap between the lowest and highest performing pupils.

A new report from the Accounts Commission highlights the rise in attainment over the last decade, as measured by exams taken during S4, S5 & S6. However, there are significant variations between councils, schools and individual groups of pupils.

The report points out that existing measures do not fully capture a child's performance throughout their time at school. For example, there are no comparable measures at council or national level to compare the performance of pupils from P1 to S3.

It also identifies the extent of new opportunities for pupils to develop a range of skills for living and working in the wider world.

Deprivation is a key factor in attainment performance but some schools in poorer areas perform well. Councils that have made most improvements have focused on areas such as developing leadership skills, improving teacher quality, increasing parental engagement and better tracking and monitoring of each pupil's performance.

Councils' spending on school education fell by 5 per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2112/13 to £3.8 billion. Most of this reduction was as a result of employing fewer staff. Education budgets will continue to face pressures in the future.

Accounts Commission chair Douglas Sinclair said:

“Councils need to fully understand what interventions are the most effective and tailor resources to meet their local needs. Councillors have a crucial role in supporting improvement by closely scrutinising and challenging performance.

“It is vital that councils close the gap between the lowest and highest performing pupils. There is no single solution for improving educational attainment and many of the factors are linked.

“There are many other skills that children need to succeed in life. As the report makes clear, there is a need for councils to understand broader educational performance and look beyond current exams.”

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Notes to editors

1. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission for Scotland. This is the first audit of its kind to specifically examine education spending by councils and performance of schools.

2. The audit focussed on primary and secondary education in council-run schools in Scotland. It did not examine early years, pre-schools or special schools, independent schools; or further and higher education establishments.

3. There are a range of attainment measures used within Scottish education. The report selected ten of these to examine the range of performance across the entire senior phase i.e. S4, S5 and S6. The selected measures are also closely aligned to the measures that councils report to their own education committees.

4. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

- The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and helps them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public
- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.