

Scottish Government consultation - Measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it

Response from Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland, 20 November 2017

1. Audit Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper.
2. The Accounts Commission published *School education* in June 2014, available [here](#), and *School education – Review and Impact* in October 2016, available [here](#). The focus of the audit was on how effectively and efficiently councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement in schools. The Accounts Commission reported that there are no comparable measures available at a council and national level on pupils' wider achievement, or on the performance of pupils from P1-S3. They recommended that councils should continue to work with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to develop a suite of agreed performance measures which would provide an overall picture of educational attainment and achievement across Scotland.
3. The Accounts Commission and the Auditor General have published a number of reports on a range of issues highlighting the need for robust and reliable data to monitor and assess the impact of interventions on outcomes. They have frequently highlighted gaps in data as a concern for both those managing and delivering services, and those scrutinising services. They also stress the importance of bodies planning for outcomes from the outset of new policies, initiatives and other developments. Getting this right makes it easier to identify the right measures for monitoring progress, in line with the model for improvement in the Scottish Government's improvement framework for Scotland's public services.
4. We welcome this consultation paper and the stated intention to agree a set of measures to assess progress in closing the attainment gap. We have replied to the questions related to the principles of measuring and monitoring attainment.
5. We will be carrying out an audit on educational attainment on behalf of the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General in 2019/20. We anticipate the audit using and commenting on the quality and availability of measures of attainment. This audit will also look at how the Scottish Government and councils are planning for outcomes, and the measures they are using to do that.

Question 1 - Have we based these proposals on the right principles?

6. We agree with the key principles set out at paragraph 12 of the consultation, particularly the need for a clear line of sight from the measures and milestones to the priorities in the National Improvement Framework. We agree that a single measure would not be helpful or meaningful, and we support the principle of using a basket of measures. We recommend that there should be another principle, about the need for consistency in the measures over time, to establish a baseline and then allow monitoring of trends year on year. We also recommend that if the

Scottish Government introduces new measures, it should do that on a planned basis, ensuring there is still consistency in others measures so that trends can continue to be monitored.

7. We note the use of SIMD quintiles as a measure of comparative poverty and that the Scottish Government has recognised that there are limitations in using this measure. We are also aware of concerns that SIMD is not a strong measure of rural poverty.
8. The consultation paper does not refer to international comparisons. We recognise that the focus is on measures to help improvement and to monitor that improvement. We recommend that the Scottish Government also ensures that there are measures that allow international comparison, to support benchmarking and improvement.

Question 2 - Do you agree with having a basket of key measures to assess the progress made?

9. Yes, we agree with this principle. There should be a broad range of measures to assess progress in both primary and secondary education. There should also be clear alignment between the agreed measures and the measures relating to attainment in the planned evaluation framework for the expansion of funded hours of early learning and childcare.

Question 9: Is the use of stretch aims, by SIMD quintile, the right way to set milestones?

10. We welcome the Scottish Government's proposal to use stretch aims for improvement for all five SIMD quintiles, rather than a single aim related to the attainment gap. The latter could potentially lead to no further improvements in attainment for the least deprived quintiles. We encourage the Scottish Government to ensure that any use of stretch aims is based on evidence of what approaches are most effective in achieving the intended outcomes.