

School Education - Review and Impact

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
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Introduction

1. This report summarises the impact of the Accounts Commission's report, *School education*, published on 19 June 2014. The high profile nature of this audit and the interest from councils, stakeholders and the media provided a real opportunity for the audit team to maximise the impact of this report. This paper sets out the impact on the key stakeholders and provides more detailed information on both the approach and the lessons learned.
2. School education has remained high on the political agenda since the report's publication and many significant policy initiatives and developments have been introduced in the last two years. These include the establishment of an Attainment Scotland Fund (February 2015) and a National Improvement Framework (January 2016) that will help close the gap in attainment and ensure all children are equipped with the skills they need for living and working in the wider world.
3. The report examines how efficiently and effectively councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement in schools. It provides an independent evaluation of how much councils spend on school education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement for pupils. It also assesses attainment performance over the last decade and identifies how effectively councils made improvements during this period. Given that changes were made to the exam system in 2014, comparisons with previous years will not be possible for some time. The reports set out a total of nine recommendations for councils that are intended to support further progress.

Key messages

4. The key messages from the report were:
 - In 2012/13, councils spent £4.8 billion on education services, of which £3.8 billion was spent on primary and secondary education. Around two-thirds of this expenditure (68 per cent) was on staff costs. Councils' spending on education reduced by five per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13, largely as a result of employing fewer staff. Councils' education services are likely to continue to face budgetary pressures, and they need to be alert to the potential impact of increased workloads on remaining staff.
 - Performance has improved against all ten of the attainment measures we examined over the last decade. However, there is significant variation in attainment between individual councils, schools, and groups of pupils; and there is a considerable gap between Scotland and the top performing countries. Current measures at both national and council level focus on attainment of secondary pupils at S4-S6 level. There are no comparable measures available at a council and national level on wider achievement, or the performance of pupils from P1-S3.
 - Levels of deprivation have a large influence on attainment. Some schools have achieved better attainment results than their levels of deprivation would indicate, suggesting that the gap between the lowest and highest performing schools cannot be wholly attributed to

different levels of deprivation. Closing the gap in performance between schools is likely to be critical to improving overall attainment levels.

- Councils that have made the most improvements have focused on areas such as developing leadership skills, and improving both teacher quality and systems for monitoring and tracking pupil data. There are also increasing opportunities for pupils to develop a wide range of skills for living and working in the wider world. Councils are starting to target resources to improve both attainment and wider achievement but there is scope to improve strategic planning and strengthen the role of elected members in holding education services to account.

Our approach to impact

5. The report provided an opportunity to take a very proactive approach in promoting the key messages and reinforce the important role that audit can play in providing assurance and supporting improvement. The high profile nature of the topic and the importance of the findings were key factors in helping create the conditions for the report to have a significant impact.
6. The key aims of the audit team's approach were to:
 - seek opportunities to reinforce the key messages from the report, engage directly with elected members and promote the elected member checklist
 - ensure consistency in how the report's key messages were delivered to councils, Education Scotland and other key stakeholders
 - build on the relationships with Directors of Education, Heads of Schools and other stakeholders, that had been established during the course of the audit
 - provide councils with more tailored information about their own performance in terms of both attainment and spending and seek ways for elected members to further scrutinise and challenge their council's education performance
 - share the evidence and data within the report with stakeholders such as Education Scotland, to support their on-going review and improvement work with councils.

Impact of the report

Media coverage

7. The report had extensive media coverage on publication, including front page leads in five national newspapers. The Times Educational Supplement Scotland has also published a number of articles on key issues arising from the report including wider achievement and primary school testing. The report has continued to receive coverage in both national and local media since publication. There have also been a number of local media articles as a result of the presentations by the audit team to councils on the report's findings.

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8. Most media coverage focused on the differences in attainment performance between councils, the attainment gap inequality and the lack of national information on pupil performance between P1 and S3.
 9. The main report was downloaded 10,398 times in the 12 months after publication - the second highest of any Audit Scotland report since monitoring began in 2007, and around four times higher than the Audit Scotland average. Between June 2015 and 2016, the report was downloaded a further 6,295 times demonstrating its on-going appeal. Report downloads spiked following any direct engagement with councils and subsequent local media coverage.

Work with national stakeholders

10. The audit team has undertaken a number of pieces of work with Education Scotland, at its request, in relation to the report since publication:
 - In December 2014, the audit team gave an in-depth briefing to Education Scotland's Leadership Team at an away-day event. This was then used as the basis for discussions among the Leadership Team on the report's implications for the organisation.
 - The audit team prepared information packs on each council using the evidence collected as part of the audit and circulated these to the respective Education Scotland Area Lead Officers (ALOs). These have been used by the ALOs to inform their discussions with councils as part of the review process.
 - The audit team was invited to comment on, and contribute to the development of a new national performance framework for school education. This was formally launched by the Scottish Government at the beginning of September 2015.
11. In October 2014, the audit team hosted an event for a range of third sector organisations (such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, Youth link Scotland etc) which work in partnership with councils to deliver wider achievement activities. The event proved useful in clarifying the landscape for education delivery within councils and the difficulties of data collection within this area.
12. The audit team collated feedback from this event and used it to inform their further discussions with Education Scotland around the development of a new national performance framework.

Parliamentary consideration

13. The audit team was invited to give a private briefing to the Education and Culture Committee (the Committee) on the findings of the report in June 2014. The Committee was particularly interested in the differences in attainment performance between and within councils, and the impact of deprivation on performance.
14. Subsequent to this, the Committee decided to undertake a year-long enquiry starting in January 2015 into the Education Attainment Gap in Scotland. The audit team was invited to take part in discussions on deciding the focus of the inquiry. The report was quoted in a significant number of submissions to the enquiry by stakeholders and in the oral evidence

sessions. The report was also mentioned in the oral evidence sessions that the Committee undertook on the Education (Scotland) Bill in 2015.

15. The Committee's legacy report published in March 2016, identified the School Education report as being "well received" and described how it had been able to build on the work of the report to examine school spending across two budget periods.

Council engagement programme

16. Since publication the audit team has had significant engagement with councils to promote the key messages from the report and provide them with more detailed council-level information on attainment performance, expenditure, and scrutiny arrangements.
17. The team carried out presentations in around two-thirds of councils. The councils visited represent a wide spread geographically, including Shetland, Orkney, and Highland in the north to Dumfries and Galloway in the south, Argyll and Bute in the west and Angus in the east. The presentations were given as part of relevant education committee meetings, or in a number of councils, at specifically arranged elected member seminars. In the case of elected member seminars, the turnout was very high. Such was the interest in the report, that in a number of councils the Chief Executive also attended the presentation and subsequent discussion.
18. Within the other councils, officers have generally shared the report with elected members at the relevant education-related committee and also brought to committee additional information provided by the audit team about performance issues pertinent to their own council. Improvement plans and actions taken in response to the recommendations with the report have been shared with the audit team.
19. The report contained nine recommendations for councils. In general terms, councils have reported that many of the recommendations contained within the report are being addressed through their own priorities and strategies for improving education. Many are also using the report's findings as a position statement to support existing plans and actions (for example, the need to develop leadership skills and improve teacher quality).

Feedback from councils on the report and impact work

20. Councils across Scotland responded positively to the report (Exhibit 1). They have welcomed the independent review of School Education by Audit Scotland on behalf of the Accounts Commission; the detailed analysis and presentation of the data; and the messages that the report contains about the lack of robust measurement between P1-S3, the link between educational attainment and deprivation and the challenging financial climate.

Exhibit 1

Examples of Council responses to School education report

- *"The toolkit is now helping Members to take account of important aspects such as 'impact on attainment' and other outcomes and is something we will be able to apply across different education work streams with regard to Elected Member involvement."*
- *"For the first time recently the report raises directly the issue of whether there is a connection between what is spent on education and the outcomes of the education service. In questioning whether there is a strong connection between spend and outcomes, the report helps us understand what actually makes a difference and where we can channel our efforts."*
- *"It has been hugely beneficial to be provided with an independent analysis of key relevant information of our Education Service in the context of the other 31 authorities in terms of performance data, resources and also management/scrutiny arrangements."*

Source: Feedback from Councils

21. A checklist of issues for elected members to consider when scrutinising education services was produced alongside the report and the audit team has taken the opportunity to discuss this at presentations and seminars. Feedback from elected members has been that the checklist is a helpful reference tool and something that will be built into training sessions in the future.
22. Overall feedback from both elected members and officers has been positive. Elected members welcomed the way the audit team approached the presentations, presenting information in an easy to understand manner, that helped enhance their understanding of the data and key messages within the report. Officers also stated that they found the presentations very helpful due to the fact they were tailored to the council and were constructive in their tone.

Contribution to national policy developments

23. A number of national policy and legislative developments have taken place since the publication of the report that reflect and build on our findings and recommendations. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning stated in March 2015 that the report had helped to inform the Scottish Government's work on raising attainment. Relevant developments include:
 - The Education (Scotland) Bill introduced by the Scottish Government requires local authorities and Scottish ministers to 'have due regard' to the importance of socio-economic disadvantage in trying to improve attainment among school pupils. Education authorities will be required to report every two years to Scottish ministers on actions taken, and Scottish ministers to report every two years to the Scottish Parliament. The Bill also re-instates the requirement that local authorities have a Chief Education Officer.
 - The Scottish Government launched a Scottish Attainment Challenge in February 2015, aimed at focusing efforts on narrowing the attainment gap. This includes a four-year £100

million Attainment Scotland Fund. The Fund is initially targeted at primary schools in councils with the biggest concentrations of households in deprived areas. It aims to focus on improving literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing. In May 2016, the Scottish Government announced that it would increase the funding available through the Scottish Attainment Challenge to £750 million over the next five years.

- Linked to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, a new Masters qualification for headteachers was announced in February 2015. The qualification became available in August 2015, and will be mandatory for all new headteachers from 2018/19.
- In January 2016, the Scottish Government launched a new National Improvement Framework that will help close the gap in attainment and ensure all children are equipped with the skills they need for living and working in the wider world. The framework introduces a national system of standardised assessment in P1, P4, P7 and S3 that is intended to bring consistency to the assessment of literacy and numeracy and the tracking of pupils' progress across Scotland.
- In June 2016, the Cabinet Secretary launched a Delivery Plan for Scottish Education. This is intended to build on the National Improvement Framework and it sets out the Scottish Government's three priorities for Education:
 - Closing the attainment gap
 - Ensuring we have a curriculum which delivers for our children and young people
 - Empowering our teachers, schools and communities to deliver for children and young people.
- In September 2016, the Cabinet Secretary launched a governance review seeking the public's views on how education in Scotland is run, including who should take decisions in relation to the education of children and young people, and how funding can be made fairer. It also asks about the support teachers and practitioners need to do their jobs well and how this can be improved. The consultation period will run until January 2017.

Other outputs from audit work

24. A checklist of issues for elected members to consider when scrutinising education services was produced alongside the report and the audit team has taken the opportunity to discuss this at presentations and seminars. Feedback from elected members has been that the checklist is a helpful reference tool and something that will be built into training and induction sessions in the future. A copy of this supplement is available on the Audit Scotland website.
25. A second scrutiny supplement has been developed and is available on the Audit Scotland website. The information presented in the supplement was gathered as part of the impact work, where the audit team attended a large number of council committees and observed how effectively scrutiny was undertaken. This new supplement sets out a range of factors that are considered to be important in creating the right environment to ensure that effective scrutiny and challenge can take place within the committee responsible for education.

Other issues and future work programme

26. The benefits of the engagement programme are that it has helped to shape the thinking about where any new audit work would add the most value in the future. Given the changes to the exam system in Scotland and the introduction of a new benchmarking tool, Insight, any future audit on school education could not be followed up in the same way as it was approached for this audit.
27. Intelligence gathered during this audit has informed other PABV audit work, including best value audits and programme development. For example, attainment and financial data collected during the audit was used in the Falkirk and Aberdeen City best value audits. The audit team also met with the respective audit teams to discuss the wider intelligence gathered on each council, this included highlighting good practice and areas for development in individual councils.
28. The intelligence gathered during this audit and through the subsequent impact work will also help inform further appraisal papers which will be developed during 2017/18.