

Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation - Readiness to Learn Thematic Evaluation Report, 2024



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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Executive Summary

What do children and young people need to be ready to learn? During extensive stakeholder engagement and collaboration as part of the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, there was a clear steer from stakeholders that the evaluation examine aspects of children and young people's readiness to learn through a focus on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing.

This report focuses on readiness to learn, presenting evidence from the evaluation and telling the story of how the focus on readiness to learn has emerged, what we have learned to date and how we plan to progress this exploration in the evaluation going forward.

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, is 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, Engagement in decision-making.

What is Readiness to Learn?

The identification of readiness to learn as a new outcome area in the revised Logic Model for the Scottish Attainment Challenge was developed through a process of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, with outcomes proposed at both short- and medium-term in relation to children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing.

The initial focus for this thematic area was to explore the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, to use this exploratory work to develop proposals to deepen our understanding in this outcome area and to take this forward into considering how to include the concept within the ongoing ASF evaluation.

Whilst the term readiness to learn is used to some extent within the education system, there is no clearly defined understanding/concept of the term in the academic literature. The evaluation therefore seeks to explore different perspectives of what readiness to learn means, whether it means different things to specific groups (children and young people, parents and carers, and teachers) and to what extent there are commonalities between these different perspectives.

What does Readiness to Learn mean to children and young people?

Children and young people's perspectives of readiness to learn has been the initial focus, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty.

The Scottish Government have worked with Young Scot and the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) to explore what readiness to learn means for children and young people. Young Scot worked with their #YSEquity Panel of young people to explore perspectives of readiness to learn which resulted in the development of a questionnaire that was responded to by over 1,000 participants, while CPAG explored the perspectives of primary and secondary school pupils perspectives of readiness to learn through the Cost of the School Day Big Question in October 2023, resulting in nearly 600 primary school and over 4,000 secondary school pupils providing their views.

The views of children and young people highlighted to date through these two complementary pieces of evidence-gathering have started to indicate what children and young people consider readiness to learn means and feels like. The findings from the engagements, some of which are summarised in this report, will inform thematic work on readiness to learn going forward.

How is Readiness to Learn being addressed as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge?

There is evidence of readiness to learn as a feature of school and local authorities' approaches in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Scottish Government analysts included questions on Readiness to Learn in the Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads survey which was undertaken in 2023. All local authorities who responded to the 2023 Survey (nineteen of thirty-two) considered that readiness to learn was a strategic priority for their local authority, whilst seventeen indicated that that was to a great extent.

Nearly all local authority respondents considered that the ASF was supporting the development of approaches to readiness to learn in their local authority. A range of examples of readiness to learn approaches supported through the ASF were provided by local authorities. These included Home Link Teams, an Educational Psychologist Service, and Engagement Officer approach, partnerships with third sector organisations, effective use of nurture teachers, and a focus on enhanced support in the Early Years.

Next steps

The Evaluation will continue to explore the concept of Readiness to Learn from different perspectives, focusing on the views of practitioners and other school staff in future work. The Evaluation will also utilise wider datasets, including PISA 2022, the Health and Wellbeing Census, and the Growing up in Scotland survey to further explore the factors that support being ready to learn.

Introduction

This report focuses on readiness to learn, a new aspect of thematic evaluation which has emerged as a result of the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The report aims to present evidence from the evaluation and tell the story of how the focus on readiness to learn has emerged, what we have learned to date and how we plan to progress this exploration in the evaluation going forward.

With the launch of the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge and its new mission, a new [Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model](#), the result of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, was published in March 2022. The new [Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Strategy 2022-26](#), developed to reflect the Logic Model, was then published in November 2023. This introduced a thematic evaluation strand. 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 enquiry¹. 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.’

In order to develop a focus in the evaluation on readiness to learn, the [Attainment Scotland Fund 2022-26 Evaluation: Analytical Plan Year 1 \(2022/23\)](#) outlined a focus on readiness to learn as one of three priority areas of thematic areas for the evaluation, along with families and communities and engagement in decision-making. It allows the evaluation to gather evidence related to the evaluation question as set out below.

Readiness to Learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge

The [Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model published in March 2022](#) illustrates, at a high level, the activities that will lead to the short, medium and long term outcomes designed to achieve the Scottish Attainment Challenge mission ‘*to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap*’.

As a result of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model introduced a new outcome focus related to ‘readiness to learn’, with outcomes proposed at both short- and medium-term as shown in Table 1 below.

¹ Priority areas of thematic focus for the Evaluation were identified and agreed following discussion and consultation with the internal Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Working Group and the Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Advisory Panel.

Table 1: Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model: Readiness to Learn Short- and Medium-term outcomes

<p>Readiness to Learn short-term outcome: a sustained focus on children and young people’s readiness to learn through focusing on engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing.</p> <p>Readiness to Learn medium-term outcome: improvements in engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing of children and young people.</p>
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As a result of this focus on readiness to learn in the Logic Model, the Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation Strategy 2022-26 introduced a new Evaluation Question around readiness to learn:

‘To what extent was there improvement in children and young people’s readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?’

Sub-questions have also been developed to guide the analytical activity on readiness to learn. These are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: ASF Evaluation: Readiness to Learn Evaluation Question and Sub-questions

<p>Readiness to learn</p> <p>To what extent was there improvement in children and young people’s readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent were engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing features of school and local authorities’ approaches? • How do schools and local authorities monitor and evaluate progress on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing? • How did stakeholders perceive a focus on ‘readiness to learn’ would support progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty? What evidence is being gathered in support of this? • What has been learned about approaches to engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing in support of progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty? • To what extent has there been an improvement in children and young people’s ‘readiness to learn’ through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?
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The thematic focus on readiness to learn in Year 1 has sought to explore the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge as

the first phase of considering how to include the concept within the ongoing evaluation. As such, it has been a process of exploration and development.

This short report seeks to summarise the exploratory work undertaken to date and to set out how we propose to develop and deepen our understanding of the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge during the coming years of the evaluation.

What does readiness to learn mean? Is there a shared understanding of the term? What does readiness to learn mean for children affected by poverty?

During collaborative discussions which took place to develop the Scottish Attainment Challenge Logic Model, there was a clear sense of the importance of 'readiness to learn' as a theoretical construct within the overall Mission for the Challenge, which we sought to capture as both a short- and medium-term outcome relating to a group of elements/measurable variables including: engagement, attendance, confidence; and wellbeing.

Whilst the term readiness to learn appears to be relatively widely used within the education system and therefore associated with a degree of shared understanding, as a concept or construct, readiness to learn is more difficult to define. From a rapid scanning of the literature, despite the relatively widespread use of the term in practice, it does not appear that there is a shared understanding/concept of the term 'readiness to learn' in the academic literature. For example, there are linked but separate concepts such as 'school readiness' which is more extensively used in the literature related to children's readiness to start school in primary, particularly in England.

There are however insights from the literature in terms of education and children affected by poverty, which have relevance to the readiness to learn concept. The current research, policy and practice focus in relation to pupil attendance and absence across the UK is key, not least in the context of the ongoing impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on attendance. Education Scotland published 'Improving Attendance: Understanding the issues'², a report based on a deep dive on attendance in Scotland in November 2023. Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) instigated a key focus on attendance in 2022, with an Attendance Symposium held as part of this work resulting in the publication of a comprehensive resource on attendance³. In addition, a substantial body of academic research on attendance is in progress. Notably, a programme of research is being undertaken by Sosu and Klein at the University of Strathclyde which

² [Improving attendance in Scotland | Planning and reporting | About Education Scotland | Education Scotland](#)

³ [Attendance – Forth Valley & West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative \(glowscotland.org.uk\)](#)

includes a focus on patterns in attendance in different cohorts and time-periods, including post-COVID-19 pandemic attendance patterns⁴.

A similar focus on attendance and absence is apparent across the rest of the UK. An inquiry into attendance was undertaken by the UK Parliament in 2023, leading to the Persistent Absence and Support for Disadvantaged Pupils⁵ report published in September 2023. The Welsh Government also commissioned an independent review in 2023 into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance⁶.

However, whilst the concept of readiness to learn clearly includes attendance, it is a much broader concept. With considerable work in progress of relevance to attendance, through this thematic strand we are seeking to explore different perspectives of what readiness to learn means, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty. Does this mean different things to specific groups, such as children and young people, to teachers, to parents? Are there commonalities, and if so, what are they? What approaches to support children and young people's readiness to learn are currently taking place? And is there emerging evidence of impact?

What have we learned about the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge?

What does readiness to learn mean to children and young people?

Two projects funded as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes⁷, one by Young Scot and one by Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland Cost of the School Day, are of key relevance and are supporting the exploration of the concept of readiness to learn from the perspective of children and young people, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty.

'What I need to learn' survey – Young Scot #YSEquity Panel

The #YSEquity Panel, established by Young Scot as part of its work in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge, has been considering readiness to learn as a

⁴ Further information on the research being undertaken by Sosu and Klein at University of Strathclyde, including publications and research in progress can be accessed at [Home \(schoolattendance.org\)](https://www.schoolattendance.org)

⁵ [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils - Education Committee \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk)

⁶ [Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales)

⁷ In addition to the distribution of funding to local authorities through the Attainment Scotland Fund, the Scottish Government provides investment for a number of National Programmes as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge to enhance support across the system [Pupil attainment: closing the gap - Schools - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot).

thematic focus in 2023⁸. Following work to refresh the #YSEquity Panel of children and young people over the summer of 2023, the Panel first explored what readiness to learn means for themselves as panel members. The work of the panel identified barriers that may stop young people feeling ready to learn as well as leading to a prioritised list of what young people need to be ready to learn. This developing understanding was then used to develop the Young Scot 'What I Need to Learn' Survey which gathered responses from children and young people from 11 years of age across Scotland from October 2023 to January 2024. This captured responses from children and young people from a range of backgrounds.

Headline findings from the 'What I Need to Learn' survey, which over 1,000 children and young people aged 11 years upwards responded to, indicate that readiness to learn is associated with a broad number of aspects of children and young people's lives in relation to attending and engaging in school.

This includes aspects such as being prepared, having the material resources needed, not being hungry, tired or stressed, feeling or being safe, valued, respected, feeling supported, and being confident and happy.

To further evidence this range, the tables below provide frequencies of survey responses to the questions 'What does ready to learn mean to you?' and 'What does it feel like to be ready to learn?'.

What does 'ready to learn' mean to you?

I have what I need to learn (stationery, technology, books) - 17%
I am motivated and have hopes for the future - 13%
I see the importance of education - 12%
I am ready for the challenges I might face - 12%
I feel respected, valued and listened to - 8%
I know school is a safe space where I will be supported by teachers - 8%
My needs are met - 7%
I know what I want for the future - 7%
I have the required materials- 6%
I am safe at home - 5%
I know there is a supportive guidance team - 3%

What does it feel like to be 'ready to learn'?

Interested and Engaged - 17%
Relaxed - Not anxious or stressed - 11%
Energised and motivated - 10%
Confident – 8%
Smart - 8%
Feel listened to and involved - 7%

⁸ The [companion thematic report on Children's Voice](#) provides further detail on the #YSEquity Panel in the section on case studies.

Comfortable - 7%
Respected - 7%
Heard and Understood - 6%
Happy - 5%
Positively influenced by your surroundings - 5%
Full - not hungry - 4%
Connected - 3%
Considered - 2%

Survey findings, available from Young Scot, will be used to support the ongoing understanding and exploration of readiness to learn from children and young people's perspectives, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty. The #YSEquity Panel is continuing to explore readiness to learn as part of Young Scot's work funded through the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programme.

The full survey findings will be available from [Young Scot Observatory](#), a hub for Young Scot's insight work.

Readiness to Learn – responses to Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland Cost of the School Day Project Big Question 2023

The Child Poverty Action Group Cost of the School Day Project is exploring children and young people's perspectives of readiness to learn through the Cost of the School Day Big Question, undertaken as part of the CPAG Voice Network launched during Challenge Poverty Week in October 2023.

Almost 600 primary school pupils and over 4,000 secondary school pupils from a range of backgrounds participated in the Big Question⁹ from across schools in the Voice Network. Pupils were invited to engage with the questions through Mentimeter, an interactive platform accessed via an individual device or mobile phone, and introduced to a fictional character to help pupils to provide their views.

The Big Question included several specific questions to explore readiness to learn:

- Children and young people's views of the importance of food to readiness to learn
- What other things (apart from food) help children and young people to be ready to learn
- Anything else that helps children and young people feel ready to learn

For those in primary school settings, having enough food was very important for 86% of children and young people who participated in the Big Question, and quite

⁹ The full findings on the Big Question will be available from [Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland](#).

important for 13%. In secondary school settings, having enough food was very important for 67%, quite important for 30% and not important at all for 3%.

In terms of other things which help children and young people to be ready to learn, participating pupils were invited to choose a 'top 5' from a range of options. Responses are provided in the tables below.

Primary responses: What other things do you need to be ready to learn?

Not being tired or stressed – 81%
Feeling that grown ups are listening to you and that your opinions are important – 71%
Being able to take part in the same things at school as your friends and classmates – 64%
Having pens, pencils and other things you need in class 61%
Having support from your parents, carers or family – 57%
Having a grown up at school you can talk to – 47%
Being able to take part in trips – 30%
Being able to get to school on time – 27%
Being able to take part in sports and clubs – 25%
Having devices at school, like tablets and laptops – 21%

Secondary responses: What other things do you need to be ready to learn?

Not being tired or stressed – 84%
Having pens, pencils and other things you need for school – 71%
Being able to take part in the same things at school as your friends and classmates – 53%
Feeling that adults are listening to you and that your opinions are important – 48%
Access to devices at school, like tablets and laptops – 46%
Having support from your parents, carers or family – 41%
Being able to get to school on time – 35%
Being able to take part in trips – 31%
Having an adult at school you can talk to - 29%
Being able to take part in sports and clubs – 20%

Young people offered invaluable insights into what they need outside of school, in school, in the classroom and from the people around them to feel ready to learn. Many of the examples they provided, such as sufficient food, uniform, lack of worry and stress, resources for learning and equal participation, are strongly influenced by family income. Young people's responses tell us more about the barriers and enablers to readiness to learn and the kinds of approaches required from practitioners and policymakers to remove barriers and support engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing.

There are clearly wide areas of overlap between these two complementary pieces of evidence indicating what children and young people think that readiness to learn

means and feels like, and exploring this in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge for children and young people affected by poverty. These pieces of engagement work with children and young people are helping to inform us about what readiness to learn means.

We will continue to explore this going forward in the thematic evaluation, seeking to build on the work to date and particularly through continued engagement with the Scottish Attainment Challenge National Programmes.

What have we learned about approaches being developed in relation to readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge?

Evidence from a range of documentary evidence has been considered in relation to the concept of readiness to learn, to bring together what has been learned to date about readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Prior to the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in March 2022, there were a range of approaches and interventions in progress across local authorities as part of the Attainment Scotland Fund which can be broadly linked to the concept of readiness to learn. For example, Progress Reports from Challenge Authorities and Schools Programme¹⁰ schools submitted in 2022 provided many examples of relevant approaches and interventions designed to support engagement and attendance, often delivered in partnership with third sector organisations.

Following the refresh of Scottish Attainment Challenge in March 2022, local authorities were required to set local stretch aims under a 'core plus' model. The 'core' aims required local authorities to set aims for an agreed set of attainment measures and to identify their own local Health and Wellbeing stretch aim, as well as having the option to set 'plus' stretch aims. Local authorities were required to submit Stretch Aims, initially covering 2022-23 (submitted in September 2022) and subsequently covering the three year period 2023/24 -2025/26 (submitted in September 2023).

In [2022 stretch aims](#) submissions, many local authorities set their local Health and Wellbeing stretch aim related to attendance. In terms of the wider concept of readiness to learn, several local authorities set relevant 'plus' stretch aims in their 2022 stretch aims submissions. For example, Inverclyde included a 'readiness to learn' 'plus' stretch aim in 2022, linked to six readiness to learn short term outcomes identified in the Logic Model. Argyll and Bute included a nurture stretch aim related to a bespoke measure for schools engaged in nurture work which included a wellbeing indicator for 'achieving' (based on SHANARRI). Another example related to a stretch aim specifically focused on addressing the Cost of the School Day.

¹⁰ Nine local authorities received Challenge Authority funding and 73 schools in local authorities outwith Challenge Authority areas received Schools Programme funding under the Attainment Scotland Fund prior to the SAC refresh in March 2022.

In [2023/24-2025/26 stretch aims](#) submissions, all local authorities included attendance as a Health and Wellbeing stretch aim, reflecting attendance as an increasing national priority. Whilst all local authorities set an attendance-related local Health and Wellbeing stretch aim for 2023-26, individual attendance stretch aims set by local authorities varied both in focus and level of disaggregation, with some stretch aims being set at an overall level, whilst others were disaggregated, for example by sector (primary, secondary, and in some instances special) or by care experience. Stretch aim submissions in some instances provided further detail on specific approaches to attendance, including whole school approaches, the development of revised local authority guidance and frameworks, and specific initiatives either in place or in the process of development to support progress towards individual local authority stretch aims on attendance. Whilst no 'plus' stretch aims submitted for 2023-26 specifically mentioned 'readiness to learn', there were a number of local authorities with nurture-based and Cost of the School Day-based stretch aims.

East Renfrewshire Strategic Equity Plan¹¹ (2022, revised 2023) provides an example of a local authority focus on readiness to learn. The East Renfrewshire Strategic Equity Plan, 'Delivering Excellence through Equity', published on eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk and submitted alongside the local authority wide stretch aims, highlighted 'children and young people's wellbeing – readiness to learn' as one of the three themes for the Strategic Equity Plan 2022 – 26. A number of activities are detailed in the Strategic Plan in relation to wellbeing and readiness to learn in order to achieve the long term outcome of 'a sustained focus on children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on inclusion, participation, engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing'. This included:

- 'Early Intervention and prevention for secondary aged pupils experiencing emotionally based school avoidance;'
- 'Enhanced partnership working to ensure pupils are well equipped to learn and engage in school.'

What have we learned about readiness to learn from the Scottish Attainment Challenge local authority leads survey 2022/23?

Evidence related to local authority focus on readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge was gathered in the Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads¹² survey undertaken in 2023¹³. The section below reports on findings from Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads survey in relation to the readiness to learn theme.

¹¹ [Delivering Excellence through Equity 30.09.22.pdf \(eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² Local authority Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) Leads are local government officers in a lead role supporting strategic planning for the Challenge.

¹³ The survey, one of the key outputs of the ASF Evaluation Year 1 Analytical Plan 2022/23, was extended to include a focus on the three thematic aspects of evaluation focus for 2022/23. A previous report was published in September 2023 focused on the survey findings on process. Further detail on the survey is included in Annex A.

Readiness to learn as a strategic priority

All local authorities who responded to the 2023 Survey (nineteen of thirty-two) considered that readiness to learn was a strategic priority for their local authority in relation to their approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. (Seventeen indicated this was to a great extent, and two that this was to some extent).

In terms of attendance and readiness to learn, the introduction of Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) in 2022/23 alongside the focus on readiness to learn was highlighted, with one SAC local authority lead respondent describing school attendance post COVID-19 pandemic as having led to a focus on attendance in relation to SEF funding:

'...school attendance post-Covid is a more widespread area for focus and as a result is a focus area for SEF funding.'

How the ASF funding is being used to support readiness to learn

Nearly all local authority respondents considered that the ASF was supporting the development of approaches to readiness to learn in their local authority. Of nineteen respondents to the survey, fifteen viewed the ASF as supporting the development of readiness to learn approaches to a great extent and three to some extent. One respondent considered this was occurring only to a limited extent.

A range of examples of readiness to learn approaches supported through the ASF were provided by former Challenge Authority¹⁴ local authorities. Respondents frequently highlighted more than one aspect as supporting readiness to learn. For example, attendance, the work of family link workers, and nurture were viewed in responses as being an element of readiness to learn.

Examples included:

- Home Link Team (for example, one local authority noted its Home Link Team was working with over 190 families to support 're-engagement in learning');
- Inclusion team (for example, one local authority noted its work with 40 families);
- Educational Psychologist Service (EPS) (for example, one respondent noted the EPS' role in supporting inclusion and readiness to learn initiatives);
- Investment in 'cluster resource staff' by a local authority;
- An Engagement Officer approach;

¹⁴ From 2015 to 2022, nine local authorities received Challenge Authority funding through the Attainment Scotland Fund. These local authorities were selected according to the poverty-related attainment gap data. In addition, seventy-four schools outwith Challenge Authority areas received funding through the ASF, selected according to poverty-related attainment gap data.

- Investment in local authority through partnership with a third sector organisation who 'provide key bespoke interventions we have ensured that children, young people and families are supported in their readiness to learn';
- Nurture - effective use of nurture teachers to support readiness to learn;
- Early years (for example, one local authority noted the development of a pilot project focused on investment in early years and Speech and Language therapy in Primary 1);
- Pedagogical approaches such as Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) for teachers.

Local authorities which had previously had schools in the Schools Programme also provided comment on how ASF funding was being used to support readiness to learn. One respondent mentioned that it is hard to be specific and separate out from other areas of work, whilst others pointed to the importance of high quality learning and teaching, a focus on equity and excellence, and ensuring a clear focus. On interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap, one mentioned nurture and nurturing approaches which were a significant focus of funding in the local authority. Another respondent highlighted a range of specific actions including:

'Employment of Family Link workers in several schools (PEF); Secondment of attendance lead, also in VHT team, development with RIC of attendance toolkit, plans to employ an outreach teacher for session 23/24 to provide direct support'.

Respondents to the survey from local authorities which were not involved in either the Challenge Authorities or Schools Programme also provided a range of specific examples as well as general comment on aspects supporting readiness to learn. One respondent highlighted that this was *'a main focus of their Strategic Equity Fund plan'*, with a particular focus on wellbeing. One respondent highlighted that work on tracking and monitoring allows for early intervention and support. Another noted a small scale project, as well as a range of interventions in some schools within the local authority supporting this. Another highlighted a range of PEF/SEF interventions to *'enable children and young people to engage in learning, attend school and support wellbeing related factors'* with a *'Focus on SIMD 1-3 localities with SEF, addressing barriers to learning'*.

Specific examples of ASF supported work related to readiness to learn included:

- Specific postholders *'working in schools to support learners to be more participative and engaged. This includes direct in-class support, nurture-based interventions, supported participation in clubs, running additional activities during and after school etc'.*
- SEF-funded Quality Improvement Officer postholder *'works in schools alongside senior leaders and visits classrooms as part of school visits, supporting schools in identifying areas for improvement'.*

How does this work inform our ongoing evaluation?

Readiness to learn and assessing the impact of the Attainment Scotland Fund

The thematic focus undertaken in Year 1 has also supported the exploration of readiness to learn within the Impact Feasibility Study which has been in progress during 2023. Scottish Government analysts, together with a working group comprised of members of the ASF Evaluation Advisory Panel, have undertaken an Impact Feasibility Study to consider approaches to evaluating the impact of the Attainment Scotland Fund¹⁵. As a result of the thematic focus on readiness to learn, the Impact Feasibility study considered how best to approach assessing the impact of readiness to learn, in order to provide evidence to support the overall evaluation question.

The Impact Feasibility Study included consideration of existing sources of evidence and the extent to which they may be utilised in the impact evaluation going forward, as outlined in Figure 1 below. One of the opportunities presented for developing an assessment of improvement in readiness to learn is through the Health and Wellbeing Census, as well as through PISA and Growing Up in Scotland (GUS). These will be further explored in the next phase of the evaluation.

Figure 1: Existing data and evidence that may be utilised to measure Readiness to Learn

Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) Survey	Health and Wellbeing Survey	Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School helped with confidence • School helped with life preparation • School work worth doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Looking forward to school • Enjoying learning in school • Life satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life satisfaction • Sense of belonging • Satisfaction with life at school • Relationship with teachers • Self-efficacy • Fear of failure • Self-confidence • Growth mindset • Value of school • Learning goals

¹⁵ [ASF Evaluation Analytical Plan 2 \(2023/24\)](#) includes a summary of the Impact Feasibility Study

Summary

Readiness to learn is a new focus area for the Evaluation which has emerged during the refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2022.

The identification of readiness to learn as a new outcome area in the revised Logic Model for the Scottish Attainment Challenge was developed through a process of extensive stakeholder consultation and collaboration, with outcomes proposed at both short- and medium-term in relation to children and young people's readiness to learn through focusing on engagement and attendance, confidence and wellbeing.

The initial focus was to explore the concept of readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, to use this exploratory work to develop proposals to deepen our understanding in this outcome area and to take this forward into considering how to include the concept within the ongoing ASF evaluation.

Children and young people's perspectives of readiness to learn has been the initial focus, particularly in the context of children and young people affected by poverty.

There is evidence of readiness to learn as a feature of school and local authorities' approaches in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. For example, the Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads survey 2023 identified that, amongst local authorities who responded to the survey, readiness to learn is a strategic priority for local authorities, and that Attainment Scotland Funding was viewed as being used to support the development of approaches to readiness to learn within local authorities. The survey provided examples of readiness to learn approaches supported through the ASF, with respondents frequently highlighting more than one aspect as supporting readiness to learn, for example attendance, the work of family link workers, and nurture.

The impact evaluation will draw on insights from the thematic focus on readiness to learn to inform the development of approaches to assessing improvements in readiness to learn in the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Annex B provides an overview of progress towards gathering evidence related to each of the evaluation sub-questions.

Next steps

Readiness to Learn continues as a thematic area of focus in ASF Analytical Plan Year 2 (2023/24), with a number of areas of exploration in progress or planned. This will support the ongoing focus in the impact evaluation to address the overall evaluation question:

‘To what extent was there improvement in children and young people’s readiness to learn through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing?’

Further areas for exploration under consideration include:

- Establishing a greater shared understanding of the term ‘readiness to learn’. For example, exploring what readiness to learn means to practitioners, to parents and carers has emerged during discussions within the ASF Evaluation Advisory Panel as an important aspect to explore.
- How do readiness to learn approaches and initiatives differ eg in high poverty contexts, work within school and beyond school gates, by sector (for example work in early years or at transition into primary versus work in secondary schools), focus on working with pupils, with families and communities, and with teachers.
- Through the lens of contextual factors in the SAC Logic Model. For example, exploring how much has this focus changed and why due to contextual factors such as COVID-19 recovery, cost-of-living crisis.
- Potential to create a children and young people’s Logic Model which explores readiness to learn within the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Annex A: The Survey of Local Authority Scottish Attainment Challenge Leads 2022/23

The Survey of Local Authority Scottish Attainment Challenge Leads was issued on 11 May and closed on 12 June 2023 and received 19 responses from across the 32 local authorities, which constitutes a 59% response rate.

Responses include seven responses from previous Challenge Authorities, five responses from local authorities previously in receipt of Schools Programme funding and seven local authorities previously in receipt of PEF only.

A [previous report on the Scottish Attainment Challenge Local Authority Leads Survey 2023](#) published in September 2023 focused on the findings from the process-related questions in the survey.

Annex B: Progress ‘stock take’ of evidence in relation to Evaluation sub-questions

Evaluation Question	Summary of progress in evidence gathering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent were engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing features of school and local authorities’ approaches? 	<p>There is evidence of readiness to learn as a feature of school and local authorities’ approaches.</p> <p>Further exploration of the concept of ‘readiness to learn’ is required, particularly in the context of children affected by poverty. This will build on the exploration undertaken in Year 1.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do schools and local authorities monitor and evaluate progress on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing? 	<p>This has not been a specific focus in the evaluation to date. There is evidence more broadly of a range of approaches to monitoring and evaluating progress including the current focus on attendance. Further evidence is required.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did stakeholders perceive a focus on ‘readiness to learn’ would support progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty? What evidence is being gathered in support of this? 	<p>Evidence from the Local Authority SAC Leads Survey 2022/23 indicates that there is some evidence emerging suggesting a focus on ‘readiness to learn’ does support progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.</p> <p>Further evidence is required, and with wider groups of stakeholders. This will be a focus in the evaluation going forward, including work to explore the perspectives of wider stakeholders on the concept of readiness to learn.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been learned about approaches to engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing in support of progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty? 	<p>Evidence from the Local Authority SAC Leads Survey 2022/23 suggests a range of approaches are being utilised by local authorities, with learning emerging about approaches and how these support progress towards the long-term outcome of improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.</p> <p>The evaluation will continue to consider learning emerging through approaches, both within local authorities and also approaches being developed by partners such as the SAC National Programmes.</p>

	<p>This will seek to complement learning emerging from wider work in terms of attendance.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent has there been an improvement in children and young people's 'readiness to learn' through focusing on engagement, attendance, confidence and wellbeing? 	<p>The forthcoming impact evaluation will be utilised to explore the extent to which there has been an improvement in children and young people's 'readiness to learn'.</p>



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