

Inspection of local authorities

How well is Renfrewshire Council improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap?

February 2019

Introduction

In 2017, we introduced a new model of inspection of local authorities which we piloted with West Dunbartonshire Council over the week beginning 11 December 2017. HM Inspectors and professional associates, working in partnership with Audit Scotland evaluated the Children Services strategies to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. These are the aims of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, a key Scottish Government programme introduced in 2015. Within this programme, Renfrewshire Council is one of nine Challenge Authorities.

As part of this inspection, we use the same framework to evaluate the contribution of the educational psychology service to the Scottish Attainment Challenge in Renfrewshire Council. Our findings on this aspect are included throughout this report.

The [Attainment Scotland Fund](#) has a total budget of £750 million over the current parliamentary term. Renfrewshire Council became a full Challenge Authority in year two of the programme (2016-17), one year after the seven authorities who were identified in the first tranche. The additional money is being directed to support the excellence and equity agenda. The aim is to close the attainment gap which currently exists between those living in Scotland's least and most deprived areas. This report is our findings on the progress Renfrewshire Council is making and the capacity of the council to continue to make appropriate progress with this work. Whilst we worked in partnership with others to gather the evidence that underpins this, the report and the judgements in it belong solely to Education Scotland. Throughout the report when you see text that is underlined you can click on this text to get further information from the web pages owned by [Renfrewshire Council](#), [The Scottish Government](#) or [Education Scotland](#). We hope you will find this useful.

The [framework](#) for this inspection includes quality indicators which enable us to evaluate aspects of leadership and management, self-evaluation and improvements in performance. We use our evidence to answer two questions.

1. How effective is the education service's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?
2. How effective is the education service's leadership, governance and management of resources to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap?

As a result, we are able to make an overall judgement about the extent to which Renfrewshire Council is improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Context

The education service in Renfrewshire Council is led by the Director of Children's Services. The service is responsible for the education of over 27,000 school-aged children and children between the ages of zero to five.

11 council managed early learning and childcare centres (ELCCs)

33 partner providers of early learning and childcare

49 primary schools

11 secondary schools

2 schools for children and young people with additional support needs

5 children's houses and supported accommodation for young people leaving care

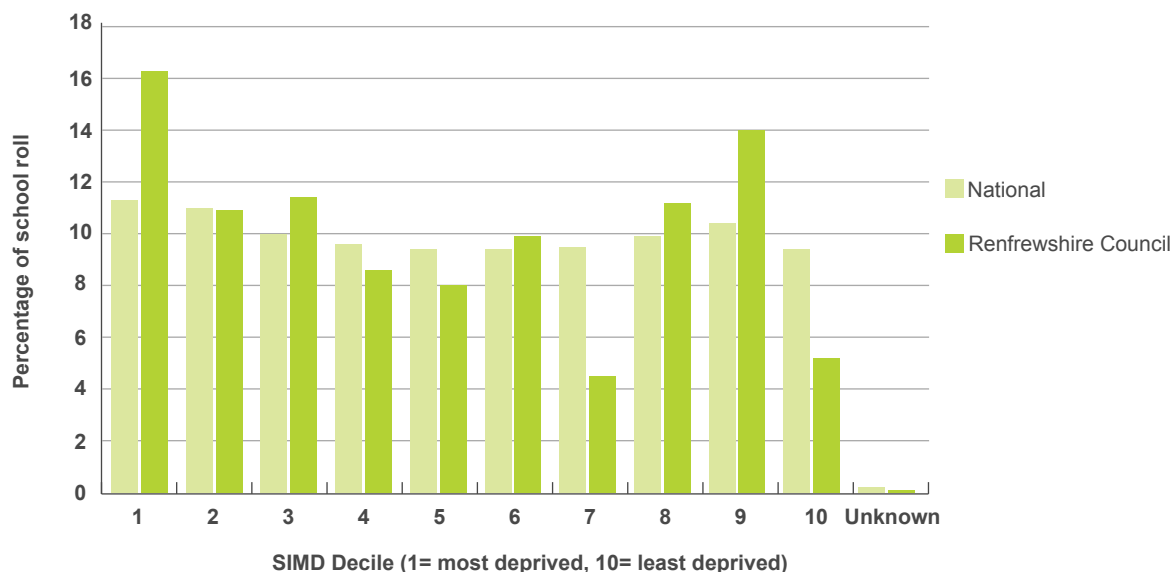
Click on the link to find out more about [Parental Engagement](#).

Since 2015, Renfrewshire Council has been committed to delivering the recommendations from its [Tackling Poverty Commission](#). When the council became a challenge authority in June 2016, it was able to build on this very strong foundation to develop its vision, values, and aims for the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The council's commitment to the Scottish Attainment Challenge improvement plan was developed in partnership with headteachers and other relevant stakeholders. The improvement plan reflects very clearly the council's strong commitment to early intervention. It incorporates the council's very successful strategy of using universal approaches to raise attainment for all, alongside targeted interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge improvement plan's close alignment with the [Children's Services Improvement Plan](#) is helping the council to achieve equity and excellence for all children and young people. The council has successfully used the additional resources made possible by the Attainment Scotland Fund to increase the pace and widen the scope of its work across its four strategic priorities for education in Renfrewshire.

1. Develop high-quality learning and teaching that leads to improved levels of attainment and achievement in all establishments.
2. Reduce inequalities and deliver improved health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people.
3. Develop high-quality leadership at all levels.
4. Improve employability skills and support all young people to enter positive and sustained post-school destinations.

[Renfrewshire Council Community Plan](#) sets the agenda for the council over the period 2017-2022 very clearly. Other key strategic planning documents, including the [Integrated Children's Services Plan](#), [Children's Services Improvement Plan](#) and the [Education Improvement Plan](#) build on this agenda. They articulate clearly a strong ambition for Renfrewshire's children and young people, and a determination to tackle poverty, improve learning and raise attainment.



This bar chart shows the percentage of pupils on the local authority's roll in September 2017 living within SIMD deciles 1 (most deprived) to 10 (least deprived), across all sectors of education. Over 27% of children and young people in Renfrewshire Council live in SIMD 1 and 2.

The Attainment Scotland Fund in Renfrewshire Council

In 2016-17, the authority was [awarded £1.712 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary programme](#). This was part-year funding. As a result of challenges in recruiting teachers to the literacy programme, actual expenditure for that year was £0.851 million. Across all years of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, the authority has found it challenging to retain teachers who have been recruited to provide backfill to allow training of substantive postholders.

In 2017-18, the authority was awarded £4.05 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary schools programme, and the authority spent £3.337 million.

In 2018-19, the authority was [awarded £4.658 million for its Scottish Attainment Challenge primary and secondary programme](#), of which it anticipates £4.594 million will be spent in the current financial year.

Renfrewshire Council chose to target Scottish Attainment Challenge resources through a simultaneous, evidence-based universal and targeted approach. Building on from the initial Schools Programme of five schools and the work of the Tackling Poverty Commission, Renfrewshire Council has strived to ensure all staff are skilled in addressing the impact of poverty on outcomes of children, young people and their families. As a result, it has made measurable progress in raising attainment across all stages whilst closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Outcomes in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing have improved significantly. This is as a result of empowered leadership at all levels, increasingly skilled use of rich data and very high levels of interconnected ways of working to ensure the most efficient use of resources.

In its original Scottish Attainment Challenge proposals submitted to the Scottish Government for 2016-17, the authority refers to a ten-year approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge in order to change 'the culture of learning across all sectors'.

The key priority areas being addressed through direct Scottish Attainment Challenge funding are:

- learning and teaching;
- families and communities; and
- school leadership.

In a paper to the Education and Children's Services Policy Board in November 2018, the authority reported that a formal exit strategy for Scottish Attainment Challenge is being finalised. This underlines the council's strong commitment to plan for sustainability and to continue to close the poverty-related attainment gap, should the funding stream cease.

How effective is Renfrewshire Council Children's Service's use of data to target, select and evaluate the impact of initiatives?

Renfrewshire Council has put in place innovative approaches to understanding and analysing data. These have been highly effective in supporting the council's work to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The council's success in securing significant improvements in educational attainment and achievement for almost all learners is underpinned by a sector-leading approach to professional learning. The council's work in this area has been strongly supported by its highly effective self-evaluation and quality improvement approaches.

Click on the link to find out more about [Data Analysis](#).

Renfrewshire Council has developed an outstanding approach to the use of data to inform improvement in all aspects of its work related to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. The central team of authority officers is strongly focused on improvement and rigorously discusses data regularly with schools, including a focus on the local evidence for impact of Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding. The data analysis team supports this work by providing highly effective professional learning for individual staff, groups, schools and officers. Trained data mentors in each primary school and principal teachers (raising attainment) in each secondary school are helping to build staff expertise in data analysis. This is enabling them to identify and implement appropriate, impactful interventions for individual children and young people. The central team very carefully tracks the individual and cumulative impact of interventions. Communications relating to the sharing of successful practice, including case studies, videos and Spotlight On Success are extremely effective in building staff awareness and expertise. Schools and the wider authority have achieved a comprehensive range of national awards for their innovative work. These include the [COSLA excellence silver award 2018](#) for Renfrewshire's Literacy Approach and the [UKLA Literacy School of the Year Award](#).

Renfrewshire Children's Services have put in place a range of highly effective approaches to self-evaluation. There is a very clear line of sight between the strategic vision, the four themed areas for improvement and the day-to-day practice of staff working across the service. An enhanced quality improvement approach has led to significantly improved consistency in quality improvement, self-evaluation and school improvement planning across Children's Services. Staff in education establishments are empowered to take account of the local context when deciding how best to meet the needs of children and young people. They have a very sound understanding of the need for evidence to inform improvement and they are very clear how their role in self-evaluation and school improvement drives outcomes for the children and young people. As a result, there is a very clear and consistent focus on improving aspects of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing to meet more effectively the specific needs of individual learners.

“ There is an effective quality assurance framework in place which allows education managers to get to know establishments across the authority very well and support the needs of all. Lots of improvement has taken place and this is being shared well with others. ”

headteacher

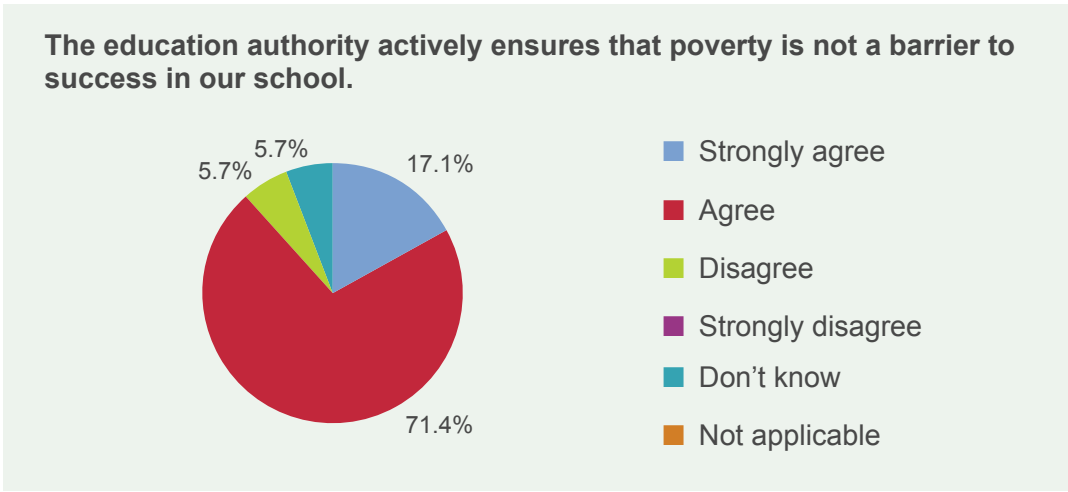
The voice of children and young people is shaping improvement in the authority, through, for example, the Youth Symposium, [Champions Board](#), and the [Youth Commission](#).

“ I now have confidence, and this helped me achieve my Higher Maths after bad prelim scores. ”

young person

“ It’s now socially cool to be a good reader in my school. ”

young person



Data from chairs of Parent Councils pre-inspection questionnaire (35 responses)

In P1, P4, P7 and S3, there have been improvements year on year since 2016-18 across listening and talking, reading, writing and numeracy. Across all stages, the attainment gap has been closing across these curriculum areas since 2015-16 when comparing SIMD 1-3 and SIMD 4-10.

In [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) qualifications, young people's performance has improved in almost all measures in literacy and numeracy over the last five years. This has generally been in line with or better than the authority's virtual comparator and the national average. Over the period 2012-13 to 2016-17, there has been an overall upward trend with the attainment of young people in the lowest attaining 20%, middle attaining 60% and highest attaining 20%. The proportion of young people moving on to a positive destination between 2012-13 and 2016-17 has increased. This fulfils the council's strategic priority to improve employability skills and support all young people to enter positive and sustained post-school destinations. Overall, the attainment gap between the most and least deprived young people in Renfrewshire Council is closing, and in 2016-17, it was lower than the national average. The council has significantly reduced the attainment gap across all stages between looked after and non-looked after young people between 2015-16 and 2017-18. This has been most marked in listening and talking.

The council's strategies to enhance learning and teaching, ensure high-quality data analysis, improve leadership at all levels, and engage with families and communities to raise attainment have been highly effective. As a result, class teachers are empowered to develop the skills they need to help them improve pedagogy and outcomes for children and young people.

The local authority works very effectively with academic partners, including the [University of Strathclyde](#) and [University of the West of Scotland](#). Together they deliver and evaluate evidence-based targeted programmes and interventions to close the poverty-related attainment gap. The central team's work with University of Glasgow (Robert Owen Centre of educational change) is helping to coordinate key workstreams to ensure that they have maximum impact.

The authority's outstanding approach to professional learning, building capacity and leadership development has enabled it to 'grow its own' promoted staff through providing appropriate training opportunities. It has also achieved very high levels of empowerment amongst teachers, parent/carers and learners through an ethos of distributed leadership. Young people are supported in developing leadership skills through, for example, the Columba 1400 leadership academies and aspirational weekends on Arran. They are extremely enthusiastic about the impact of these initiatives and are keen to see them extended.

**“ I have learned not to doubt myself, have self-belief
and not to say ‘I can’t’. ”**
young person

Renfrewshire Council has appointed Development Officers in assessment and moderation, literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, and curricular transitions. This team works extremely effectively to offer high-quality career long professional learning to staff on an individual, establishment and authority-wide basis. This is an innovative use of Scottish Attainment Challenge funding which has improved pedagogy across the authority as well as the consistency of assessment and moderation.

The authority's innovative approach to improving children's and young people's attainment in literacy is supported by extensive professional learning for staff. It successfully empowers schools to prioritise the elements which suit their own context and has had a very positive impact across the authority. This has led to raised attainment in reading and writing, and a narrowing of the gap between the least and most deprived groups. [Specialised training for classroom assistants](#) in the literacy approach has improved their understanding, enhanced their roles and increased their job satisfaction. The approach has had a very positive effect on the ethos of schools and is now having a strong influence on other areas of the curriculum. For example, aspects of the numeracy approach are significantly improving the teaching of numeracy and providing children with a depth of understanding about numbers at different levels. This work has been recognised nationally as outstanding practice.

The local authority has extremely successful approaches and interventions to support health and wellbeing. Children's and young people's health and wellbeing have been significantly enhanced in schools where nurture principles have been embedded. In partnership with Barnardo's, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) programme is being delivered in 28 primary schools to develop the emotional literacy and resilience of learners. In-class coaching and professional learning is significantly improving the confidence of teachers and support staff in teaching and supporting this area of health and wellbeing.

Staff are using a very wide range of universal and targeted family learning opportunities to successfully support the most vulnerable learners. For example, [Families First](#) holiday clubs provided lunch and engaging activities to over 200 children and their extended families daily. Targeted [Family Learning programmes](#) in partnership with [community learning and development](#), including [Pizza Reading](#) and Pizza Maths, have supported the families in greatest need to engage much more effectively with school. Over 300 parent/carers have engaged with Pizza Family Learning and report that they feel much more confident in school and are better able to support their children in reading and numeracy.

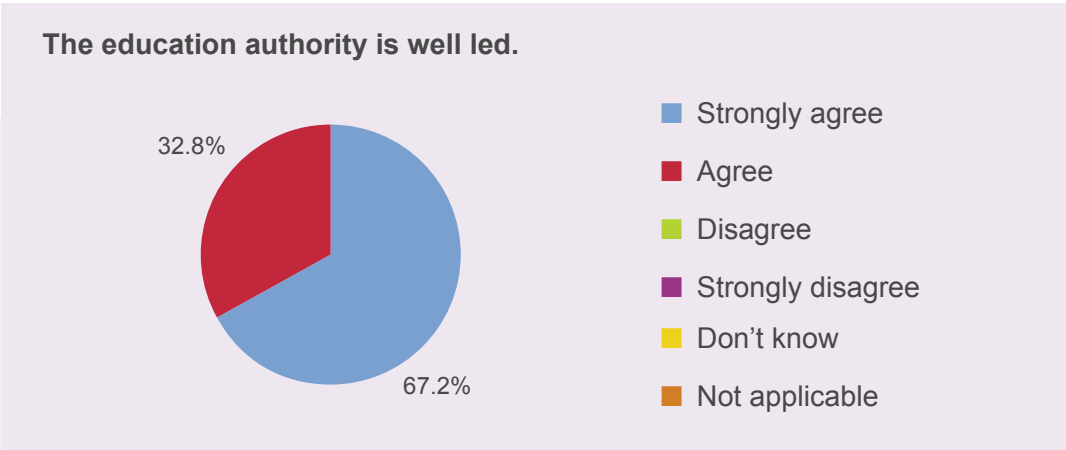
The council has invested Scottish Attainment Challenge funding to establish a highly effective workforce. Transition teachers work successfully across primary and secondary schools to support curricular transitions for targeted children and young people. This initiative has had a significant impact, building increasingly strong relationships between schools and parent/carers, and encouraging greater family and parental engagement. Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs) support children, young people and their families when learners are struggling with attendance, exclusion or difficult home circumstances. They skilfully develop trust and positive relationships with parent/carers. Parent/carers are extremely appreciative of the work which ISAs do and report improvements in children's and young people's engagement with their family and with their school.

“ I don't know what I would have done without the support of the ISA last year. There is a massive improvement in my son's attendance at school. ”

parent in focus group

How effective is the education service’s leadership, governance and management of resources to improve learning, raise attainment and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap?

Renfrewshire Council Children’s Services central team and establishment heads provide highly effective strategic direction and very clear planning to improve learning, raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap. This strong strategic leadership ensures that all decision-making and improvement planning is underpinned by an excellent use of research and data. There is a clearly articulated common moral purpose and strong culture of empowerment and leadership of improvement at all levels. This operates within an outstanding and innovative governance framework where lines of responsibility and accountability are clearly understood. Highly effective financial governance systems are helping to ensure delivery of best value at all levels.



Data from headteachers’ pre-inspection questionnaire (58 responses)

Senior leaders within Renfrewshire Children’s Services have established an extremely positive ethos and culture of strong collaborative leadership, which has led to a highly motivated workforce. They provide highly effective strategic leadership and very well-judged support and challenge to build on the work of Renfrewshire’s Tackling Poverty Commission. They have been successful in using Scottish Attainment Challenge funding to enhance and develop universal interventions used in schools and educational establishments to help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

A very clearly articulated vision and well-defined set of priorities are helping to raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap within Renfrewshire Council. Staff at all levels, from strategic leaders through to practitioners share a passion for achieving this vision. The vision and priorities for education inform work at all levels in the authority in relation to raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Action towards achieving these aims is very coherent across the authority and is aligned to local and national objectives.

There are very effective governance arrangements in place for both the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the [Pupil Equity Fund](#). These are well understood at all

levels from the Scottish Attainment Challenge Governance Board through to School Improvement Plans. This enables a high level of scrutiny at every level within the structure. It also helps to ensure that all interventions are evidenced-based, provide value for money, are evaluated and impact positively on the outcomes for children and young people. The governance framework is underpinned by very well structured project management arrangements. There is a clearly defined structure in terms of accountability, delegation, monitoring, controls and risk.

The governance arrangements in place for the [Education and Children's Services Policy Board](#) very effectively support elected members to scrutinise and challenge progress in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Opportunities to visit schools to see Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding activities taking place in practice have aided elected members' understanding of what individual schools are trying to achieve with their additional Pupil Equity Fund allocation.

The authority issued clear guidance to all headteachers in March 2017, setting out the practical and governance arrangements relating to Pupil Equity Funding. These arrangements are further enhanced by a dedicated Pupil Equity Fund Coordinator, who has oversight of all Pupil Equity Funding activity and supports the authority and headteachers with the central coordination of these funds. The Coordinator works very effectively in collaboration with schools to provide support in relation to finance, staffing and procurement.

Senior leaders ensure that sustainability is embedded in all initiatives. They have put in place an empowered system where they have built the capacity of leaders and practitioners in relation to planning, quality assurance, evaluation and service delivery. They have invested in developing the skills of key staff in learning and teaching, data literacy and leadership. This is helping to ensure that interventions are extremely well embedded and sustainable. For example, investment in innovative leadership programmes such as 'step back', aspiring leaders and one-to-one coaching for headteachers, is helping to create a culture of extremely effective leadership which reflects and builds successfully upon the values of Renfrewshire Children's Services.

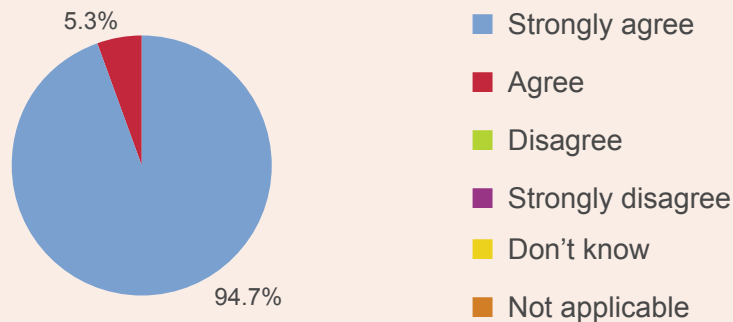
Headteachers feel empowered, valued, supported, and challenged. They have a very good awareness of the impact of poverty on outcomes for children and young people in their schools. They are knowledgeable about how this affects their own schools as well as other schools in their quartile. In turn, they have a deep understanding of the individual needs of their children, young people and families.

Chairs of Parent Councils are well informed about how and what Pupil Equity Funding is used for in their children's schools. Pre-inspection questionnaire data indicates that 89.3% of respondents agree that 'the education authority actively promotes and supports improving learning in our school'. Seventy-one point four percent of Parent Council chairs who responded agree that elected members demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the quality of education.

The contribution of the Renfrewshire Council educational psychology service to the Scottish Attainment Challenge

Click on the link to find out more about [Nurture RNRA Systemic Change](#).

There is a partnership approach to supporting children, young people and families.



“ Over the last few years there has been a huge change in the level of parental engagement at school and local authority level – I feel like it is a true partnership. ”

Parent Council chair

The [Renfrewshire educational psychology service](#) has undertaken a rigorous and robust review of their practice. This is in response to the areas for development outlined in the [validated self-evaluation \(2016\)](#). They have now aligned their model of service delivery very effectively to the needs of Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding initiatives. The educational psychology service is making a strong contribution to helping to close the poverty-related attainment gap in Renfrewshire. Their contribution is particularly effective in the development and implementation of the whole-school Renfrewshire Nurturing Relationships Approach. The increasingly close relationship between the educational psychology service and the educational priorities of the local authority has led to a clear and shared vision for improvement in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund developments. The strong leadership of the principal and deputy principal educational psychologist, and increasingly distributive leadership across the team, is enabling the service to make significant contributions to the work of Renfrewshire Children's Services. Educational psychologists demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to focus on outcomes in their interventions. This is helping to improve their service delivery, particularly in those areas related to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. They have strong multi-agency working in place and use data well to inform their work. They will continue to evaluate and develop a range of interventions focused on closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

To what extent is the education service improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap?

Renfrewshire Council is making excellent progress with improving learning, raising attainment and narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap. HM Inspectors are confident that the evidence and evaluation to date indicates the following strengths and aspects for development.

Strengths

- Very strong self-evaluation, informed by high-quality data, is resulting in very successful, evidenced-based universal and targeted interventions, which are securing improvement.
- Highly effective leadership, shared vision and an ethos of empowerment of staff at all levels to improve outcomes for children and young people, their families and communities.
- The outstanding impact of very high quality professional learning approaches, developed and delivered in collaboration with partners.
- Renfrewshire Council's excellent approach to Scottish Attainment Challenge governance, which is set within a well-defined accountability framework.
- Significant year-on-year improvements in closing the poverty-related attainment gap across all key indicators in the broad general education across curricular areas.

Aspects for development

- As planned, build on successes achieved to date in addressing the poverty-related attainment gap and continue with plans to develop the sustainability of initiatives beyond the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

What happens next?

Education Scotland is confident that Renfrewshire Council is making **excellent** progress in improving learning, raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Leadership and governance within Children's Services are highly effective and outcomes in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing have improved significantly. We are confident that the local authority's self-evaluation processes are of a very high quality and are leading to improvements. As a result we will make no further evaluative visits in connection with this inspection.

HM Inspectors
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