

22 March 2018

**Education & Skills Committee:  
Attainment and Achievement of School-Aged Children Experiencing Poverty**

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do. By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland. We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Children in Scotland is pleased to be able to respond to the Education and Skills Committee's inquiry on Attainment and Achievement of School-Aged Children Experiencing Poverty. We welcome the focus of this inquiry in recognition of the Scottish Government's emphasis on action to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. However, we also recognise that poverty, while an important driver of attainment inequalities, is not the only factor to consider. Equally, poor attainment is a significant risk but not an inevitability of growing up in poverty. We strongly recommend therefore, that this inquiry should recognise the relationship between this agenda and other current related areas of national policy and legislation, including the Child Poverty Act, Social Security Bill, expansion of early learning and childcare, and the extension of child rights under additional support for learning legislation, as well as educational policy and legislation.

**1. How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?**

Children in Scotland conducts a substantial volume of participation and engagement activity and consultation work with children and young people. Much of this activity has taken place in a school setting and/or has an education-related focus. In the last three years this has included engagement around school governance, school nursing, and STEM guidance. These activities have enabled children and young people to reflect on their educational experiences and what makes school an environment that puts children and young people in a position to succeed in education.

Research continues to show the impact of wellbeing on attainment<sup>i</sup>. A literature review in recent research by Health Scotland also highlighted the benefit of social and emotional learning programmes on wellbeing<sup>ii</sup>. As a partner in the **Leaders of Learning** project we supported pupils to identify school-based solutions to support wellbeing. Children and young people identified wellbeing as a key factor that helped or hindered their learning:

*"I want teachers to understand that when I feel sad it's hard to learn. I want teachers to be aware that I might be putting on a brave face and to take the time to understand what I might be going through at home and within myself"  
(Young person, Leaders of Learning)*

Children identified that supportive teachers, options such as cool-down rooms or access to other relaxation resources for all children could improve their learning environment and put them in a position to succeed<sup>iii</sup>.

Our multi-award-winning partnership programme **Food, Families, Futures** (FFF) has aimed to address food poverty, particularly during school holiday periods, and its links to wellbeing

and education. Research has shown that learning loss does occur over summer holiday periods, particularly for children and young people living in areas of high deprivation<sup>iv</sup>. Equally, families in receipt of free school meal entitlement have the added challenge of meeting the additional costs of providing an extra meal for children over holiday periods. Food, Families, Futures supported communities in areas with a high rate of free school meal entitlement to roll out summer clubs with provision of free meals.

The 2017 FFF evaluation report highlighted a range of positive impacts of the project, and in terms of attainment, indicated a positive impact on numeracy levels among children who attended<sup>v</sup>.

*"It feels really good because we're like learning new stuff before we even get in to school into our new classes and the teacher will be impressed by everything we have learned so far." (child, FFF project)*

It is important to stress that the clubs provided free food for all attendees, not just those with free school meal entitlement, removing the stigma of receiving such provision. Furthermore, food formed only one part of the summer clubs, and they also presented an important opportunity for parent/child interaction, fun and play, supporting parents to improve their cooking skills and create positive relationships between families, schools and the wider community. For all of these reasons, we recommend that similar approaches are developing in all local authorities across Scotland.

As we will elaborate on later, family learning can have a beneficial impact on the attainment of children and provision of this nature should include the option for this.

Finally, we feel it is important to stress that evidence shows a large proportion of learning takes place outside the school setting, and that pre-school learning and development is vital to educational attainment<sup>vi</sup>. In particular, high quality early learning and childcare that meets the EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) criteria has a key role to play in supporting child development and educational attainment and closing the attainment gap<sup>vii, viii, ix</sup>. Our **CHANGE** project aims to develop community-driven models of high quality early learning and childcare to meet local delivery needs in the East End of Glasgow, within in the context of expanding provision. Learning from this indicates that there are still many challenges associated with providing accessible and high-quality childcare in areas of deprivation. We strongly recommend therefore that the committee consider the impact of early years services in any inquiry into effective methods to close the attainment gap.

## **2. Are there any services that you / your organisation has not been able to provide that you believe would work?**

Children in Scotland acts as the representative voice for the children's sector in Scotland, and through policy development, conducting research, carrying out participation activities, delivering workforce development opportunities and raising awareness of how children and their families can most effectively be supported, aims to achieve positive outcomes for all children and families across Scotland.

We believe it is better to avoid, as far as possible, the emergence of an attainment gap. Preventing a problem is almost always more effective and less costly than trying to solve it once it has become entrenched. Growing Up in Scotland, has found that significant differences in cognitive ability already emerge by the age of three, that these differences were strongly associated with socio-economic status and, more concerningly, had increased by age five. This is also correlated with poorer outcomes later in life<sup>x, xi</sup>.

This data highlights the importance of pre-school interventions. Enabling children to have the kind of experiences in early life that promote cognitive development and learning is shown to be the most effective method of reducing educational inequalities. A key factor highlighted by The EPPE Project, among much other research, was the importance of high quality provision to success<sup>xii</sup>. A 2015 paper indicates that 'high quality' is consistent with high (ie university) qualification levels for staff, high staff/child ratios and an appropriate curriculum (in this respect,

countries that place strong emphasis on creativity, play and social relationship development perform better than those who focus on formal competence acquisition)<sup>xiii</sup>. The Scottish Government needs to ensure provision meets these criteria if it wishes to improve attainment.

The quality of the home learning environment is also critical. Several approaches have been shown to effect improvement in this area. Individual support through universal services such as Health Visiting and programmes like Family Nurse Partnership; peer support and group learning of the type provided in Family Centres and high quality out-of-home care (high quality group care as outlined below) or family-based care, such as the Community Childminding scheme operated by the Scottish Childminding Association can all have a positive effect<sup>xiv, xv, xvi</sup>.

For children of school age, evidence suggests that the relationship between the child and the teacher and the capacity of the school to form the kind of relationships with parents that effectively engages them as partners in the learning process, are critical<sup>xvii</sup>. However, we know from our work with the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFs) that many parents still face barriers to engaging with the school community and schools need to do better to support parents to become involved in their child's learning. Both NPFs and Parenting Across Scotland have also highlighted that parental engagement needs to be better supported in early learning and childcare settings.

To identify solutions to this problem of parental engagement we would point the committee in the direction of an evidence review conducted by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships at Edinburgh University, which collaborated with Children in Scotland on an evidence review on what works in family engagement. This provides a comprehensive overview of effective approaches<sup>xviii</sup>.

We also believe that an understanding how to develop and sustain nurturing and supportive relationships should form a key part of teacher education. Despite the documented importance of developing supportive relationships between school, child and family, this currently receives little or no attention in initial teacher education.

### **3. If you work with schools/local authorities/others to address school attainment and wider achievement, what makes collaboration on this issue easy/difficult?**

Our work on our FFF project has been successful in large part due to positive collaboration with the schools involved. Schools presents vital community hubs, with access to resources and equipment, including kitchen facilities. Often these excellent community resources go unused during the school holiday periods. We recommend that better access to the school estates should be more widely explored to support greater community use and help build positive relationships between the school and parents by association.

The other important aspect of the collaboration has been the relationships between Children in Scotland, schools and other local delivery partners. Where partnerships were developed early and partners involved, co-ordinating activities clubs were able to have a wider reach and engage more children, young people and families. Partnership working also supported a wider range of activities that could promote attainment, ranging from food, to play, to health and wellbeing<sup>xix, xx, xxi</sup>.

### **4. What else could be done to support the attainment /achievement of children and young people from families affected by poverty?**

Poverty has a range of impacts that can have negative consequences for the attainment of children and young people affected by it. The stress of living in continually straitened financial circumstances can also have a negative impact on parental capacity to give their children the best start in life. We believe therefore that Scottish Government efforts to **eliminate child poverty** through the Child Poverty Act should have a positive impact on the poverty-related attainment gap, and we would recommend that attainment is included within the revised measurement framework to help evaluate the impact of poverty reduction on attainment.

We do however believe that the Scottish Government could go further still, through full use of its powers under the Social Security (Scotland) Bill. Evidence suggests that topping up Child Benefit by £5 per month would lift 30,000 children out of poverty<sup>xxii</sup>. The most recent IPPR report also strongly recommends reversing the Two Child Limit on Universal Credit to reduce child poverty<sup>xxiii</sup>.

It is vital to be clear, however, that as a single variable poverty is not the most significant determinant of educational attainment. **Parent attributes**, behaviours and style are far more relevant. For example, attachment and warmth are important factors in educational attainment (and, indeed in other life outcomes)<sup>xxiv</sup>. However, the existence and extent of these factors is strongly associated with material poverty, that is poverty which makes it harder for parents to provide these factors. The stress of living in challenging financial circumstances and the lack of financial resources can limit the opportunity for parents to give their children these developmental 'inputs' so critical to academic attainment. Parents living in poverty are also less likely to aspire to their children entering higher education<sup>xxv</sup>.

To address this meaningfully it is vital that, firstly, parents are enabled to support their children's healthy learning and development to the best of their ability. There are many tried and tested approaches to this; evidence indicates that individualised support, embedded within strong universal services, are more effective than targeted programmes.

We need to recognise, however, that parental capacity is not infinite, and that high quality early learning and **childcare** services have a role to play in ameliorating the issues that children who experience poverty face, as we have outlined above.

Children in Scotland manages Enquire, the national advice service for **additional support for learning**. The evidence is clear that poverty is both a cause and an effect of additional support for learning needs<sup>xxvi</sup>. We believe one of the key barriers to supporting and improving the education attainment of children and young people experiencing poverty is that poverty and additional support needs are often treated separately in policy, resource decisions and, as a trickle-down affect, at the frontline in schools. There needs to be some rationalisation of education policy and practice to reflect the two-way relationship between poverty and additional support needs.

In recognition of the considerable resource committed to schools through the **Pupil Equity Fund**, we recommend that a thorough independent review is undertaken on the use of this funding and its impact on poverty-related attainment. This should be undertaken to better understand how this fund can be most effectively used to support it to achieve greater impact in the future.

Finally, and importantly, we recommend that the committee listens directly to the **experiences of children, young people and families** to understand what supports attainment from their perspectives. Reports and videos from our projects highlighted above, and from other voluntary sector partners, including End Child Poverty group members, would provide invaluable evidence to shape the inquiry's conclusions and recommendations.

#### **For further information please contact**

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