

# Fraser of Allander Institute

## Submission to the Education, Children and Young People Committee ahead of evidence session 9

### February 2022

The Fraser of Allander Institute is an independent research institute based within the University of Strathclyde. We carry out research to inform the big challenges facing our economy and society in Scotland. We are not politically aligned and we do not campaign on any issues. Public statements and comments made on behalf of the Institute, including this submission, are based on suitably robust evidence and analysis.

Over the last year, the Institute has been involved in a collaborative project looking at data and analysis that could help local areas better understand the linkages between poverty and attainment. This project has been funded via the Data for Children Collaborative with Unicef and worked with eight local authorities from across the Northern Alliance Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC). Within this submission, I will summarise some of the main findings from this work.

#### **Impact pathways**

Based on a review of the recent literature and a series of workshops with education practitioners from across the Northern Alliance RIC, we identified four key pathways to attainment on which to base our analysis on:

##### 1. Attendance at school

There are a number of factors linked, directly or indirectly to poverty and deprivation, such as poor health, lack of back-up transport if school buses are missed or difficult work schedules meaning parents aren't in the home to get children ready in time for school.

##### 2. Ability to learn at school

Factors such as hunger or lack of sleep could be linked to poverty or deprivation, and reduce the capacity of the child to learn. The quality of the learning environment may also affect pupils – for example the extent to which they feel secure and are not subject to shame or stigma.

##### 3. Ability to learn at home

Poor quality housing, poor accessibility to broadband connections, stress and overcrowding are all examples of how poverty and attainment could limit the quality of homework and revision. These issues are likely to have had an even greater impact during the period of the first lockdown in 2020 when schools were shut.

#### 4. Involvement in enriching extra-curricular activities

Evidence shows that enriching extracurricular activities such as afterschool clubs, sports and hobbies are beneficial to attainment, yet children from lower income families attend such activities much less regularly than their better-off peers.

One area we were particularly interested in looking at is the extent to which living in a rural area affects the relationship between poverty and attainment. These are detailed in [Table 1](#).

Subsequently, we started to scope data and evidence that could be used to explore the extent or relationship between poverty and deprivation and these pathways. Over 30 datasets were identified, some of them at a spatial level (for example, DWP Children in Low Income Households data at intermediate zone level) and some that could be analysed at household level (for example take-up of Scottish Child Payment or overcrowding).

In general, the education practitioners that we spoke to had found shortcomings with the data they currently had available to them relating to poverty and deprivation. SIMD was felt not to work well in rural areas. Due to both the large geographical areas that SIMD relates to in rural areas and the relevance of the information captured within the measure. Free School Meals data was limited in that it only refers to those who chose to register (which may not be all who need it) and the roll-out of universal provision means it was not an indicator which could be used across all age cohorts.

However, there may still be merit in including this data, and some initial analysis using Free School Meals data did find a difference in educational attainment for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and some evidence that students from low socio-economic backgrounds that attend rural schools have experienced poorer educational mobility than their urban counterparts.

The next stage of this work is to analyse a broader range of data, as identified in the scoping study, to test whether they can predict differences in attainment. One use of this may be that if some data is shown to have a significant impact on attainment then this will provide evidence to allow schools to identify and focus resources on that issue. For example, if we find that attendance at after school activities is a strong predictor of differences in attainment in rural areas, schools may be able to focus resources on providing transport for children outwith normal school bus times.

We hope to be able to move forward with this next stage of work, funding dependent, within the next 18 months.

**Table 1**

<b>Table 1 – Rural specific issues that can affect attainment</b>	
<b>Cost of living</b>	
Higher cost of food	Nutritional needs are not met, and this affects learning
Higher cost of fuel	Limits private transport
	Ability to heat home constrained
Lack of homes to rent	The higher cost of housing constrains spending
	May have to live in a sub-optimal location
<b>Digital Infrastructure</b>	Less reliable broadband
<b>Distance to school/work/services</b>	Long commute to and from school
	Long commute for parents constraining their time at home before and after school
	Issues with having to board on the mainland
	Longer distances and poorer public transport impact on access to services
<b>Living in sparsely populated areas</b>	Feelings of isolation and constraints on social life lead to lower wellbeing (children and parents)
<b>Seasonality of work</b>	Fluctuating income and times of the year when parents will be at work for long hours
<b>Small schools</b>	Multiple year groups in one class and difficulties in pitching lessons at the right level for all*
<b>Stigma</b>	Small, often relatively homogenous, communities mean any difference is more likely to stand out
	People may be less likely to take support offered, for example, Free School Meals, because issues will become known to the broader community

\*It was noted that composite classes are not only a rural phenomenon, and even in single year classes, teachers will need to adapt to a range of ability