

ACCOUNTS COMMISSION – SCOTTISH SCHOOL EDUCATION REPORT

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 School education accounts for a significant proportion of local government spending, and a number of important education policy developments have taken place in recent years, such as the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). However, there has been no independent evaluation of how much councils spend on education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement for pupils. The Accounts Commission requested an audit was undertaken and its publication is timely as it provides an assessment of attainment over the last decade and identifies how effectively councils made improvements during this time (See Appendix 1)
- 1.2 The report outlined nine recommendations for councils which are summarised in the main report at section 4.4 and Audit Scotland are visiting each authority to attend council committees, to present report findings and engage directly with elected members

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Community Services Committee:

1. note the key findings contained within the Accounts Commission report on Scottish Schools Education
2. note the proposed discussion of the Argyll and Bute position at the business session prior to the Community Services Committee in March 2015

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 School education accounts for a significant proportion of local government spending, and a number of important education policy developments have taken place in recent years, such as the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). However, there has been no independent evaluation of how much councils spend on education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement for pupils. The Accounts Commission requested an audit was undertaken and its publication is timely as it provides an assessment of attainment over the last decade and identifies how effectively councils made improvements during this time (See Appendix 1).

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 It is recommended that the Community Services Committee:

1. note the key findings contained within the Accounts Commission report on Scottish Schools Education
2. note the proposed discussion of the Argyll and Bute position at the business session prior to the Community Services Committee in March 2015.

4.0 DETAIL

4.1 School education accounts for a significant proportion of local government spending, and a number of important education policy developments have taken place in recent years, such as the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). However, there has been no independent evaluation of how much councils spend on education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement for pupils. The Accounts Commission requested an audit was undertaken and its publication is timely as it provides an assessment of attainment over the last decade and identifies how effectively councils made improvements during this time (See Appendix 1).

4.2 The Commission's audit assessed how efficiently and effectively councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement in schools. It examined:

- how much councils spend on school education and what they spend it on
- how effectively councils are driving forward improvements in pupil achievement

- how efficiently councils are using their resources to maximise pupil achievement.

4.3 As part of the publication of the report, the Commission requested that Audit Scotland visit each council to attend council committees, to present report findings and engage directly with elected members. A formal impact report will also be prepared with an expected production date of Summer 2015.

4.4 The report recommendations are summarised below:

Councils should:

- a) ensure they fully understand why levels of attainment vary between their schools and different groups of pupils
- b) develop and implement strategies to reduce the gaps in performance between the highest and lowest performing schools
- c) continue to work with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to develop a suite of agreed performance measures which would provide an overall picture of educational attainment and achievement across Scotland
- d) review the sufficiency of information provided to education committees on attainment at S4-S6, pupil performance between P1-S3 and wider achievement. They should also ensure committees have the time and support to adequately challenge and hold to account education services
- e) develop more coordinated approaches to gathering and recording information on the range of wider achievement activities offered in schools, including the levels of pupil participation and the outcomes they achieve. This will help councils to scrutinise performance and ensure resources are being used as efficiently as possible
- f) ensure education strategic documents contain clear priorities and actions that set out what is to be achieved in the short, medium and long term. Performance management arrangements should monitor outcomes and report regularly on delivery against strategic objectives, such as raising attainment among the lowest performing pupils
- g) consistently use the Scottish Local Government Benchmarking Framework to compare their performance against other councils, and share good practice to improve educational attainment and wider achievement
- h) fully assess the potential long-term impact on attainment and wider achievement of budget reductions
- i) monitor and act on the impact of revised working practices and staff reductions across all affected groups (eg, teachers, administrative staff, classroom assistants) on staff wellbeing by, for example, monitoring sickness absence levels, and through specific questions in staff surveys.

4.5 The presentation accompanying the Accounts Commission report to be made by Audit Scotland will highlight the key findings of the report and provide an outline of some key features of education in Argyll and Bute. The paper on SQA Examination Results to be presented at the Community Services Committee on 11 December 2014 will also comment in more detail on the Argyll and Bute

position and the actions being taken forward by the Education Service picking up on the key findings. A further discussion of this data will be held at the proposed business session prior to the Community Services Committee in March 2015.

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1** In 2012/13, councils spent £4.8 billion on education services, of which £3.8 billion was spent on primary and secondary education. Around two-thirds of this expenditure (68 per cent) was on staff costs. Councils' spending on education fell by five per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13, largely as a result of employing fewer staff. Councils' education services are likely to continue to face budgetary pressures, and they need to be alert to the potential impact of increased workloads on remaining staff. Performance has improved against all ten of the attainment measures we examined over the last decade. However, there is significant variation in attainment between individual councils, schools, and groups of pupils; and there is a considerable gap between Scotland and the top performing countries.
- 5.2** The attached report from the Accounts Commission gives a wealth of information on attainment in Scottish schools which acts as a good prompt for discussion in Argyll and Bute around education standards and the use of resources to support learning and teaching.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** Policy – In line with national and council education policy around attainment and achievement
- 6.2** Financial – No implications arising directly from this report
- 6.3** Legal – No implications arising directly from this report
- 6.4** HR – No implications arising directly from this report
- 6.5** Equalities – the report highlights variations in attainment across schools in Scotland and highlights issues of consistency in opportunity for learners.
- 6.6** Risk – No implications arising directly from this report
- 6.7** Customer Service – No implications arising directly from this report

Cleland Sneddon
Executive Director of Community Services

Cllr Aileen Morton
Policy Lead for Education and Lifelong Learning

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For further information contact:

Ann Marie Knowles, Head of Education,

Tel: 01369 708474,

email: annmarie.knowles@argyll-bute.gov.uk