



the National Parent Forum of Scotland

National Improvement Framework: Consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it

The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) was established in 2009 following the introduction of Parent Councils by the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. The Forum aims to support parental involvement in education and provides a parental perspective at a national level. The Forum is parent-led; comprised of volunteer parent representatives from each local authority area, who communicate with Parent Councils and support parent involvement at a local level.

The NPFS welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to closing the poverty-related attainment gap during the lifetime of this parliament, and is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the proposals for measuring the gap and milestones towards closing it. However, we would once more remind Scottish Government that to allow for meaningful consultation with parents, the pace of change must be carefully considered.

Q1 Have we based these proposals on the right principles?

We believe that these proposals are based on the right principles and would like to draw attention to the following points.

For the NPFS, a key principle is the attempt by Scottish Government to use credible measures whilst retaining transparency and a relatively straightforward approach. In particular, we agree that there should be a clear line of sight from the agreed measures and milestones to the priorities set out in the National Improvement Framework. This should result in reporting that is accessible to all stakeholders within Scottish Education, and should avoid unnecessary bureaucracy at all levels.

We would like to remind Scottish Government that parents must be informed of the data that Scottish Government is gathering and the purpose of it. This is crucial to avoid any misunderstandings. Lessons should be learned over the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) communications strategy, where the process for informing parents appears to have been ill-considered. Many parents are still unaware of the assessments and those that are aware of them have been receiving mixed messages. All stakeholders have a role to play, including local authorities and headteachers, but it is the responsibility of Scottish Government to ensure its communication strategy is effective i.e. that accurate and timely communication is actually taking place and that the messages are clear and easily understood.

Q2 Do you agree with having a basket of key measures to assess the progress made?

Firstly, whilst we concede that at present the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is the most appropriate data to identify the most and least disadvantaged children and young people, we take this opportunity to once more express our concerns at Scottish Government relying on this data. SIMD is not sensitive to the significant proportion of children and young people from very disadvantaged backgrounds living in more affluent quintile areas (due to a lack of social housing) and is extremely problematic for measuring poverty in rural areas. In our opinion, the development of a more comprehensive and accurate funding method for calculating need should be a priority for Government. While SIMD continues as the basis for measuring need, it will require alteration and enhancement to ensure it is fit for purpose.

We entirely agree that it would be unrealistic to assess the performance of the system via a single measure and are optimistic that the 8 key outcome measures, supported by 17 sub-measures, will give a broad picture of the attainment gap.

Q3 Are the proposed key measures the right ones?

We believe it is correct to use a range of measures that reflect the breadth of issues that can impact on attainment. We acknowledge that these are not stand-alone measures, as improvement in one measure will support and enhance the improvements in others i.e. improved wellbeing increases the ability to learn which, in turn, improves attainment. We agree that several of these measures provide a clear line of sight from the priorities set out in NIF:

- *Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy*

In terms of simplicity we understand the value of creating one single measure for primary literacy and one for primary numeracy. However, we are interested in how Scottish Government will allow for children with Additional Support Needs (ASN), including English as an Additional Language (EAL), who may not be reaching benchmarks but are progressing to the best of their individual ability within the ethos of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).

- *Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children*

We are encouraged that thought has been given to using the 27-30 month review data to obtain an early years measure of children showing no concerns, as the gap is currently clear at this point. However, it would be entirely preferable to use the data as published by ISD Scotland. This data is more accurate because it is based on those children who have had a review and excludes those who have not. The sub measure of 27-30 month review uptakes indicates fewer children in the bottom SIMD attend these checks, so it follows that they are more likely to have a concern.

- *Improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing*

We believe that it is right that aspects of physical and mental health and wellbeing are considered. It is important that all stakeholders, including teachers and parents, fully understand what "wellbeing" is and how crucial it is for learning.

We understand the reasoning that only a small number of measures are included, partly determined by data availability, and are encouraged that a feasibility study is being conducted into methods of collecting information from children and young people for improvement purposes. We urge Scottish Government to ensure that parents are well informed, about what their children and young people will be asked and the purposes of collecting the data, to prevent any sensationalising of the process. True, informed consent is vital.

We would like to see a commitment that the choice of measures will be reviewed as national data collection evolves, and that once an effective form of measurement is in place it can become a key measure rather than a sub measure.

- *Improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people*

We are pleased to see the inclusion of the Participation Measure, within the key measures, which clearly links to this NIF key priority. However, we hope this data will be gathered more than once and over an extended period of time, to avoid the risk of obtaining an inaccurate assessment of the situation.

Q4 Will this approach avoid the introduction of perverse incentives?

We hope that the range of measures is broad enough to avoid perverse incentives but hope that Scottish Government will closely monitor the situation and take feedback from stakeholders if the measures need to be reviewed for this reason.

Q5: Is 3rd level the right measure to use of attainment at S3?

We are happy to accept the judgement of the Scottish teaching unions on whether this is an appropriate level, but have concerns over the timing of this.

As previously stated, we would like more information on the measuring of children with Additional Support Needs (ASN). It is important to emphasise the achievement of appropriate levels i.e. level 2 may be an appropriate achievement for some people.

Q6: Does the use of SCQF levels reflect a sound approach to measuring senior phase attainment? Are there other options such as Insight tariff points?

The use of the SCQF tariff appears to be an open and transparent way to measure attainment and is compatible with other global measures. We also accept that it is more accessible to parents than Insight tariff scores, which are very difficult for the layperson to engage with. However, parents require a wider explanation of SCQF and of how the points translate into further study courses etc.

We feel it is important that wider achievement is also taken into account and are concerned that, at present, neither SCQF tariff point or Insight accurately reflect this.

Q.7 How best can we give more meaning / clarity to the terms “SCQF 5” and “SCQF 6” so they are accessible to all

We are pleased by the recognition by Scottish Government that the terms are not clear to all stakeholders. Building on and/or making links to current knowledge can help the understanding of new terminology e.g. explaining that Higher is SCQF level 6, so it makes sense without having to learn a whole new system. However, the best way of achieving clear and accessible messages is to have consistency in the use of terminology i.e. deciding on the most appropriate terms and definitions and keeping to them.

We would like to see some of the SCQF publications publicised in partnership with Scottish Government in national promotional campaigns. Parents frequently explain to us that the easiest way for them to understand the SCQF framework is to gauge where their own qualifications sit. For these reasons we would suggest promotion of the following leaflets:

<http://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SCQF-Parent-Leaflet2017.pdf>
<http://scqf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/scqf-timeline-low-res.pdf>

Q8: Are these the right sub measures? Are there others that should be included?

The majority of the parents we consulted accept the need for P4 and P7 assessments but there has been little backing for P1 assessments; we remain unconvinced of the true value of data gathered at the primary 1 level.

We welcome the inclusion of several Health and Wellbeing measures. Whilst we appreciate that Scottish Government is using the data currently available, it is important to highlight that it is not comprehensive. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is for children aged 3-18 and the current health and wellbeing measures (the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Mental Wellbeing scores) omit children at each end of that spectrum.

Q9 Is the use of stretch aims, by SIMD quintile, the right way to set milestones?

The NPFS agrees that it is essential to have clear milestones to measure the gap. As we have previously expressed to Scottish Government, we have heard from parents who are concerned that attainment is not being increased in SIMD 1 but rather being decreased in SIMD5. We therefore welcome the use of stretch aims that will reflect improvement in every SIMD quintile.

Q10: Are the stretch aims set at the right level?

We are pleased with the ambition in the aims although there should be scope to review these in future to ensure they are still compatible with over-arching aims.

Do you have any other comments on this consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it?

Lastly, we would like to take this opportunity to again emphasize our concerns to Scottish Government about this data being used inappropriately. National press and some other interested parties cannot resist making comparisons, either between schools or local authorities, and this can be very damaging to school communities as a whole. Every effort should be made by Scottish Government to communicate positive messages about our schools, curriculum and the whole school community. We need to celebrate the progress and efforts of our parents, parent councils and schools, who are all striving each day to achieve the best possible education for our children.

Kind regards,

Joanna Murphy.

Joanna Murphy, Chair, National Parent Forum of Scotland