

Agenda Item	10.
Report No	EDU/7/26

The Highland Council

Committee: **Education**

Date: **25 February 2026**

Report Title: **ACEL Attainment Update**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - People**

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report highlights the improvement measures implemented by the Education Service's Quality Improvement Team to provide support and challenge to Highland schools in improving levels of pupil attainment in the Broad General Education phase and in relation to closing the poverty related attainment gap.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Note** the Council's commitment to improving attainment and achievement at all stages through strategic initiatives developed in collaboration with school staff detailed in **Appendix 1**.
- ii. **Note** the content of the report, the positive outcomes for young people and the focus on improving further.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource - There are no direct resource implications arising as a direct consequence of this report.

3.2 Legal - There are no legal implications associated with this report.

3.3 Risk - The Service is committed to a sustained focus on progress and improvement to mitigate against the risk of under-performance which impacts on children and young people being able to achieve their full potential. The Attainment and Achievement Strategy and Education and Learning Improvement Plan details activity to support schools and strengthens the delivery of improved results to address this.

3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – There are no health and safety risks arising from this report.

3.5 Gaelic - Continued improvements in primary phase Gaelic Medium Education

attainment will support progress and achievement in the secondary phase in Gaelic Medium Education and Gaelic Learner Education (GLE) courses.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies, or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5. Overview

- 5.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the progress made in attainment across the stages of the Broad General Education (BGE) phase. The performance data reported are based on Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels (ACEL) in literacy and numeracy. These are key performance measures for the Highland Council, Scottish Government, and the Local Government Benchmarking Framework.
- 5.2 Pupil progress towards achievement of a Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) level in Literacy and Numeracy is based on the professional judgement of teachers. Professional judgement of a pupil's progress is based on a broad range of assessment evidence for a pupil and evaluated against the standard contained within the national Curriculum Benchmarks documents for Literacy and Numeracy.

6. Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (ACEL)

6.1 Primary Attainment

ACEL combined data for Literacy and Numeracy is created by calculating the numbers of children who have achieved Early, First and Second levels respectively at Primary 1, 4 & 7 and for literacy this includes calculation based on achievement in all three curricular areas: listening and talking; reading; and writing.

Highland literacy overall for Primary 1, 4 and 7 stages has steadily improved since 2021 rising by 20% in that period. In 2024/25 the previous year's level of attainment 69% was maintained. Over the last 2 years levels of improvement have been maintained or increased in the three elements of reading, writing, and listening and talking with the exception of Primary 1.

Highland Numeracy attainment for Primary combined stages of P1, P4 and P7 has increased by 14% since 2021. In 2024/25 the previous year's attainment level of 74% was maintained. The Primary 1 and Primary 4 saw a 1% decrease with Primary 7 increasing by 1%.

Attainment in Gaelic Literacy has increased by 13% since 2021 and has now surpassed with the National average. Literacy attainment for P1 and P4 children in Gaelic Medium settings is not included in the overall literacy statistics however, it should be considered as part of the overall literacy attainment picture for Highland. 1082 children experience Gaelic Medium Education which equates to 6.9% of the Primary aged population.

6.2 S3 ACEL Attainment

In Literacy 88% of pupils achieve level 3 literacy or above by the end of S3. Attainment at fourth level literacy for S3 pupils has seen a 3-year rising trend, currently 61%, an increase of 10% over the last 2 years. The gap in National attainment at Fourth Level Literacy has reduced by 5% in the same period.

In Numeracy 91% of pupils achieve level 3 numeracy or above by the end of S3. Attainment for S3 pupils at fourth level has increased by 6% over the last 3 years with current attainment at 67% of S3 pupils achieving level 4 numeracy.

6.3 Closing the Poverty Related Attainment Gap

Attainment in literacy and numeracy for Primary stage pupils living in Highland's most deprived data zones has increased by 28% in literacy and 19% in numeracy since 2021.

For ACEL combined Literacy, in 2021 the poverty related attainment gap was 32%; in 2025 it was 22%. This represents a narrowing of the gap by 10%. For Numeracy in 2020 the gap was 30% and in 2025 it was 23% which represents a narrowing of the gap by 7%.

In S3 the gap for Literacy has remained at approximately 20%. For Numeracy in 2020 the gap was 17%, reducing to 13% in 2025, showing a reduction of 4%.

7. Stretch Aims

7.1 Every Local Authority in Scotland is required to submit aspirational three year 'stretch aims' for specific core measures, as determined by the Scottish Government.

7.2 Highland schools' attainment is rising steadily and progress towards stretch aim is generally positive for our most advantaged learners. Continued focused work is required to further narrow the poverty related attainment gap, improve outcomes for our least advantaged learners and meet our stretch aims by 2026 for those living in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Index 1 (most deprived areas).

8. Supporting Improved Attainment

8.1 The Education & Learning restructure provides a strong focus on the importance of Quality Improvement. Area Quality Improvement Managers, supported by other Council Officers, are able to support and challenge schools to ensure robust application of their improvement cycle as detailed with their Standards and Quality Reporting and School Improvement Planning.

8.2 The new Quality Improvement Team are working closely with The Highland Council's Education Scotland Attainment Advisor and now meet regularly with the wider

Education Scotland Team to consider further supports that benefit both the central team and schools. Partnership working to date has centred around professional learning offers for schools and focused work around effective learning and teaching.

8.3 The Raising Attainment Reference Group and Raising Attainment Board have been established and are working to ensure rigorous scrutiny of data at Local Authority level. Work is progressing to develop policy and guidance related to tracking and monitoring pupil progress to allow for improved systems at school level.

9 Improvement Actions progressed to date

9.1 The Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy outlined the four areas for focused improvement activity.

- Leadership
- Learning & Teaching
- Curriculum
- Data

All four areas being further supported by concentrating, in parallel, on the following foundation principles of Health and Wellbeing, Parental Involvement and Engagement and Inclusive Practice.

The activity that will be undertaken is detailed within the Education and Learning Improvement Plan. To ensure successful implementation of this plan, school leaders and their staff are now engaged in associated workstreams to ensure the strategy is realised and impacts positively on children and young people's outcomes.

Workstreams include work concentrated around the following:

- Creation of a Learning, Teaching and Assessment policy
- Developing Play pedagogy across Primary 1
- Improving relationships and behaviour
- Supporting inclusive practice through Staged Intervention Framework
- Developing a Health and Wellbeing Framework.

9.2 Raised attainment and achievement is further supported via a suite of Professional Learning opportunities, available in person and online, and provided by the new Central Quality Improvement Team and Education Scotland. Some examples are listed below:

- All Headteachers have had access to a workshop to support the use of the Progress and Achievement Module within SEEMIS with many taking up the offer of individualised support.
- Assessment and Moderation guidance and support has been accessed by 52 Primary schools with more due to take up the opportunity during the next inset day.
- A further 37 primary schools are participating in the [National Improving Writing Programme - CYPIC](#)
- Engagement with Education Scotland has ensured 15 primary schools are involved and will benefit from access to whole school Numeracy support [Mathematics and Numeracy: Self-evaluation Framework](#)
- Five schools are engaging with the National Improving Attendance Quality Improvement Programme bringing the total to 10 (1 all through, 1 primary and 8 secondaries).

8.3 All actions to improve attainment are augmented by partnership working with the Education Scotland Attainment Adviser and with wider partners through the Integrated Children's Services Plan. In addition, it is anticipated that the work and calls to action from the Poverty and Equality Commission will assist in strengthening our position and ensuring a renewed focus on the work needed to close the poverty related attainment gap, as defined within the National Improvement Framework and to meet the duties of the Equality Act and UNCRC.

9. Next Steps

The Education & Learning Service will ensure:

- that actions detailed with the Education and Learning Improvement Plan are progressed to support improvement across Highland schools;
- improvements relating to attainment and achievement are implemented by schools to improve evaluations in the Quality Indicator (How Good is Our School 4? QI 3.2 Raising Attainment and Achievement);
- that all actions relating to the use of pupil tracking systems are implemented to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation of pupil progress, and that interventions are put in place for learners who are not making expected progress;
- facilitate learning and development opportunities for school leaders and staff in the use of data analysis to inform improvements in practice to improve attainment and achievement.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

Date: 6 February 2026

Author: Bernadette Martin-Scott, Chief Officer Primary
Fiona Grant, Chief Officer Secondary

Background Papers:

Appendices: Appendix 1 – A Curriculum for Excellence Attainment Report 2024/25

Appendix 1

A Curriculum for Excellence Attainment Report

Broad General Education (BGE) Toolkit Data

The data in this section is extracted from the Scottish Government's BGE toolkit. It ensures that all children and young people's attainment is included and calculated as an overall percentage. It shows the relative position of Highland compared to National data.

ACEL statistics provide information on performance in the reading, writing, listening & talking and numeracy 'organisers'. A pupil is deemed to have achieved the expected level in literacy if they have achieved the expected level in all organisers: reading; writing; and listening & talking.

Note: no S3 data was collected in 2020-21

Note: GME learners are not included in this data for Primary 1 and Primary 4

Table A: Highland Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL)

Stage / Group	Measure	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	% Increase
Primary 1, 4 & 7 (Combined)	Literacy	49%	59%	65%	69%	69%	20%
	Numeracy	60%	69%	72%	74%	74%	14%
S3 (Combined)	Literacy – 3rd Level	—	83%	87%	86%	88%	5%
	Literacy – 4th Level	—	41%	48%	51%	61%	20%
	Numeracy – 3rd Level	—	88%	89%	89%	91%	3%
	Numeracy – 4th Level	—	55%	61%	66%	67%	12%

Table B: National Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL)

Stage / Group	Measure	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	% Increase
Primary 1, 4 & 7 (Combined)	Literacy	67%	71%	73%	74%	75%	8%
	Numeracy	75%	78%	80%	80%	80%	5%
S3 (Combined)	Literacy – 3rd Level	—	86%	88%	88%	90%	4%
	Literacy – 4th Level	—	48%	56%	58%	63%	15%
	Numeracy – 3rd Level	—	89%	90%	90%	91%	3%
	Numeracy – 4th Level	—	59%	63%	65%	68%	9%

In all bar one measure, Highland's percentage rate of increase over the period has been higher than the national rate – and almost 3 times the rate of improvement when comparing Primary ACEL combined.

Table C: Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL)
 June 2025 by Stage and Subject Area (Highland Schools compared to National Average)

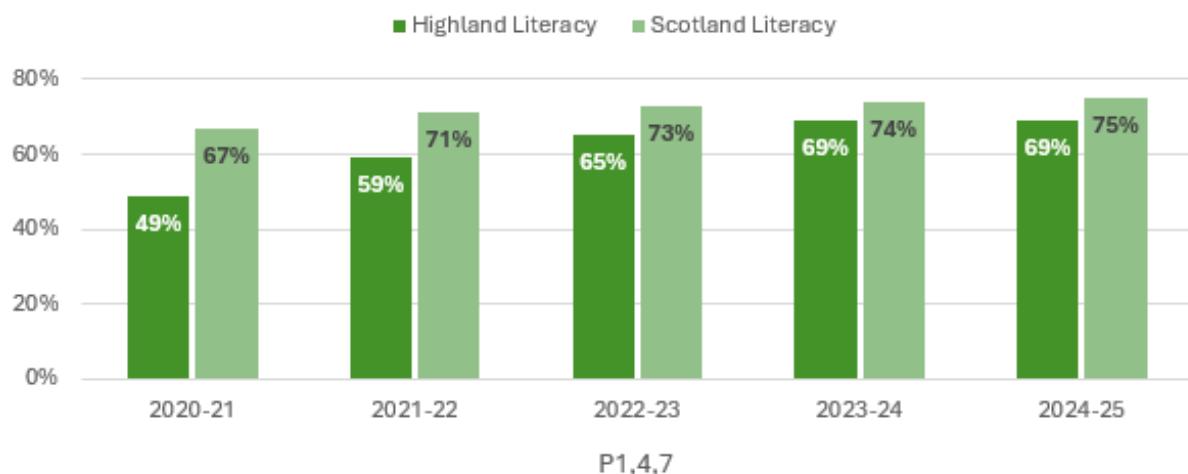
	Reading		Writing		Listening & Talking		Literacy		Numeracy	
	HC	Nat	HC	Nat	HC	Nat	HC	Nat	HC	Nat
P1	75.6%	80.6%	72.7%	78.7%	85.4%	86.5%	69.9%	76.4%	79.2%	84.6%
P4	74.8%	79.1%	69.3%	74.2%	86.7%	87.4%	65.9%	72.1%	70.3%	77.9%
P7	79.8%	82.0%	72.8%	76.9%	88.6%	88.5%	71.1%	75.2%	74.7%	78.9%
P1-4-7 Combined	76.9%	80.6%	71.6%	76.5%	87.0%	87.5%	69.0%	74.5%	74.5%	80.3%
S3	89.9%	91.2%	89.2%	90.8%	90.1%	91.8%	88.3%	89.8%	91.2%	90.9%

Primary ACEL attainment

To demonstrate attainment progress over time, the graph below shows Highland performance in the combined primary stages of P1, P4 and P7 in literacy overall, compared to National for the last 5 years. Highland's consistent improvement and accelerated progress has resulted in a closing of the gap to National figures from 18% in 2021 to 6% in 2025 for Literacy and from 15% in 2021 to 6% in 2025 for Numeracy.

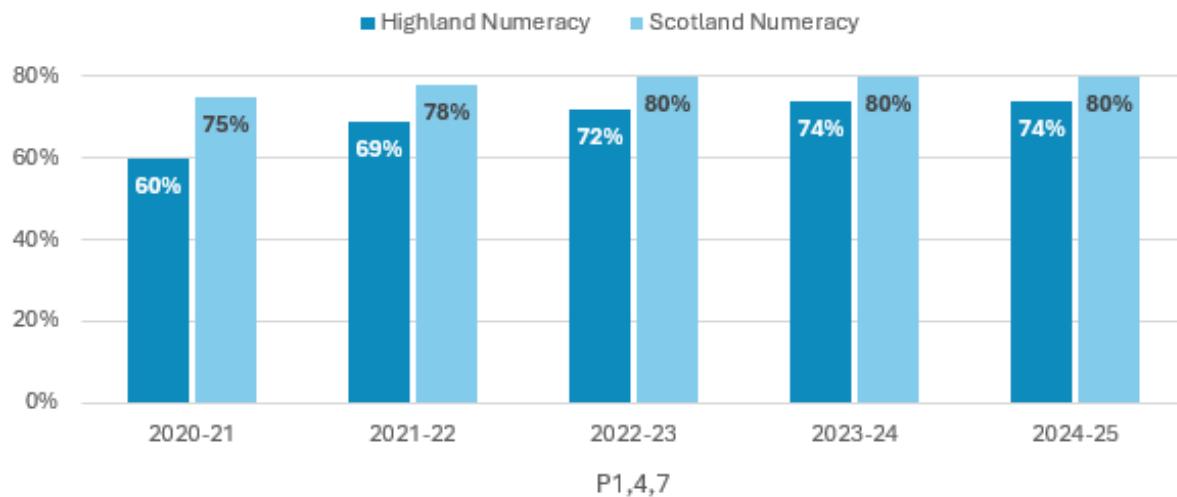
Literacy P1,4,7	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Literacy	49%	59%	65%	69%	69%
Scotland Literacy	67%	71%	73%	74%	75%

Highland Literacy and Scotland Literacy



Numeracy P1,4,7	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Numeracy	60%	69%	72%	74%	74%
Scotland Numeracy	75%	78%	80%	80%	80%

Highland Numeracy and Scotland Numeracy

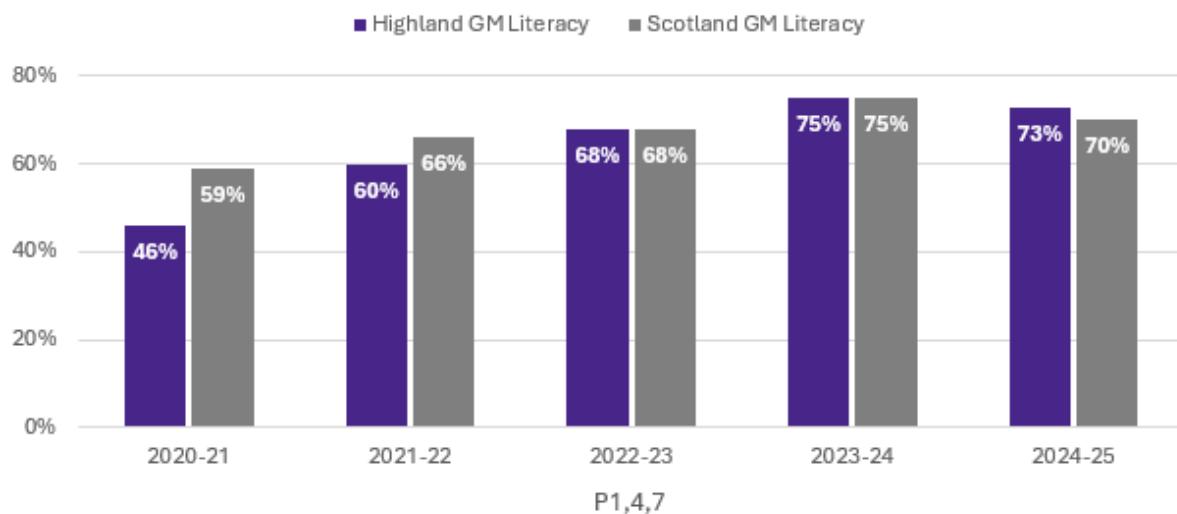


Gaelic Attainment

The chart below displays combined P1, P4 and P7 literacy within Gaelic Medium (GM) education over the past 5 years. Over this time attainment has increased by 13 percentage points from 2021 to 2025. There has been a slight decline in Highland data in session 2024/25 in the previous year however it should be noted that in this year Highland ACEL attainment has overtaken Scotland's national average which fell by 5%.

GM Literacy P1,4,7	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland GM Literacy	46%	60%	68%	75%	73%
Scotland GM Literacy	59%	66%	68%	75%	70%

Gaelic Medium Literacy - Highland and Scotland



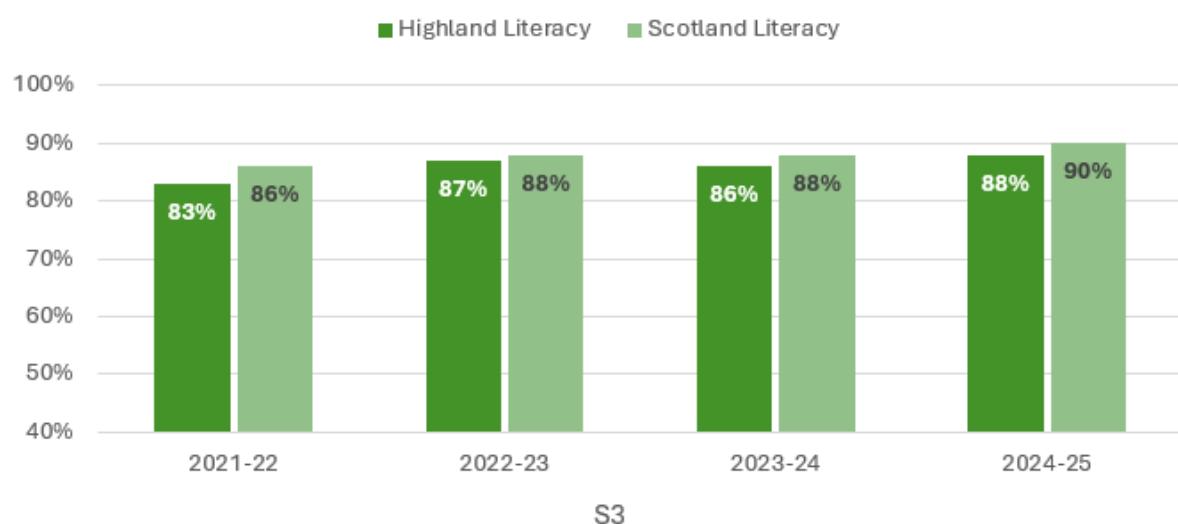
S3 ACEL Attainment

Literacy

Currently 88% of pupils achieve level 3 literacy or above by the end of S3. Attainment at fourth level literacy for S3 pupils has seen a rising trend and is currently 61%, an increase of 10% from the previous year. The gap between Highland and Scotland for both Level 3 and 4 has reduced to 2%.

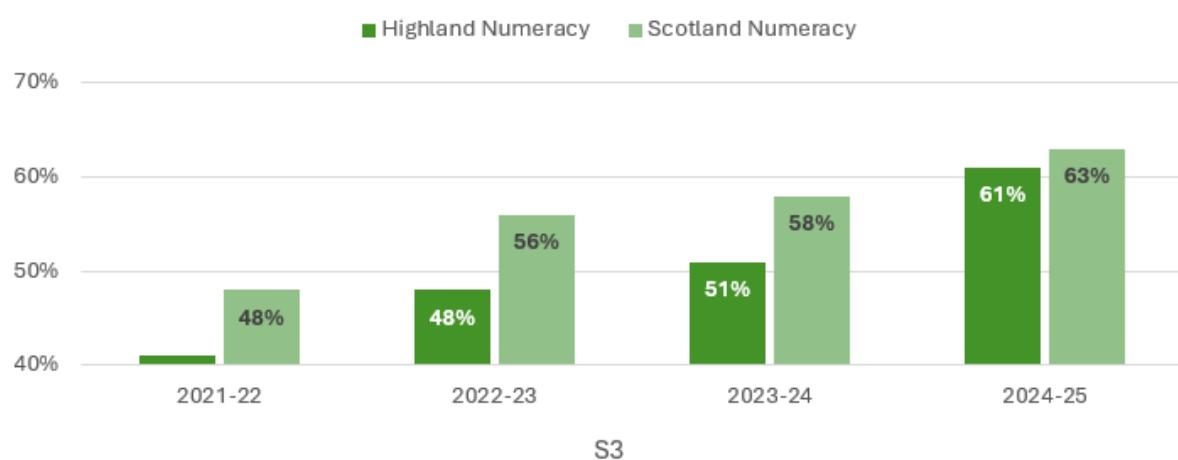
Third Level or better Literacy	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Literacy	83%	87%	86%	88%
Scotland Literacy	86%	88%	88%	90%

Highland Literacy and Scotland Literacy - Third Level or better



Fourth Level or better Literacy	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Numeracy	41%	48%	51%	61%
Scotland Numeracy	48%	56%	58%	63%

Highland Numeracy and Scotland Numeracy - Fourth Level or better

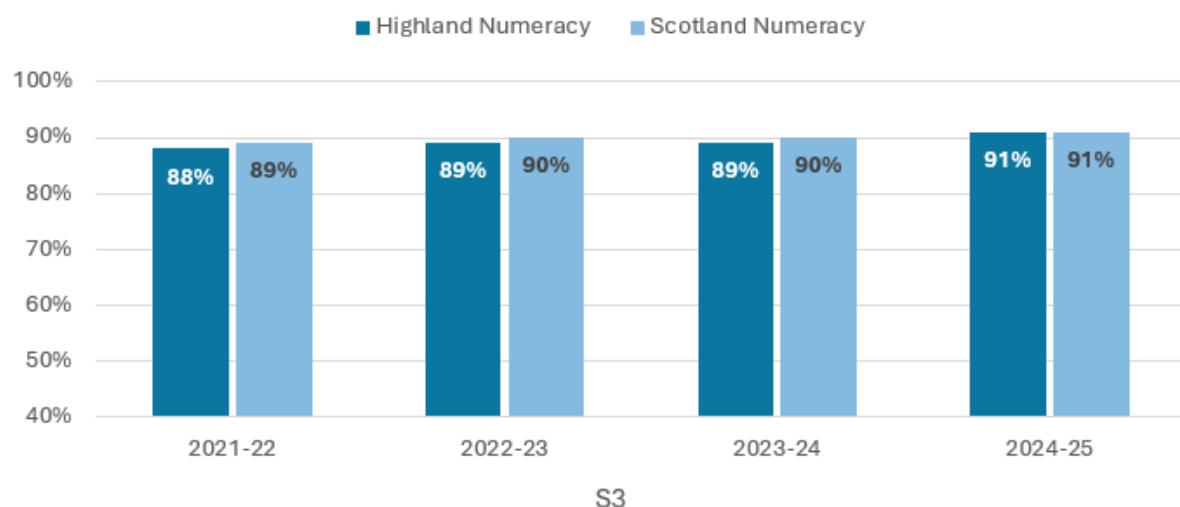


Numeracy

Currently 91% of pupils achieve level 3 numeracy or above by the end of S3. Highland Level 3 data is in line with national data for the first time. Attainment for S3 pupils at fourth level has seen a rising trend with current attainment at 67% of S3 pupils achieving level 4 numeracy. This is a 1% increase on the previous year and 6% over the previous 2 years.

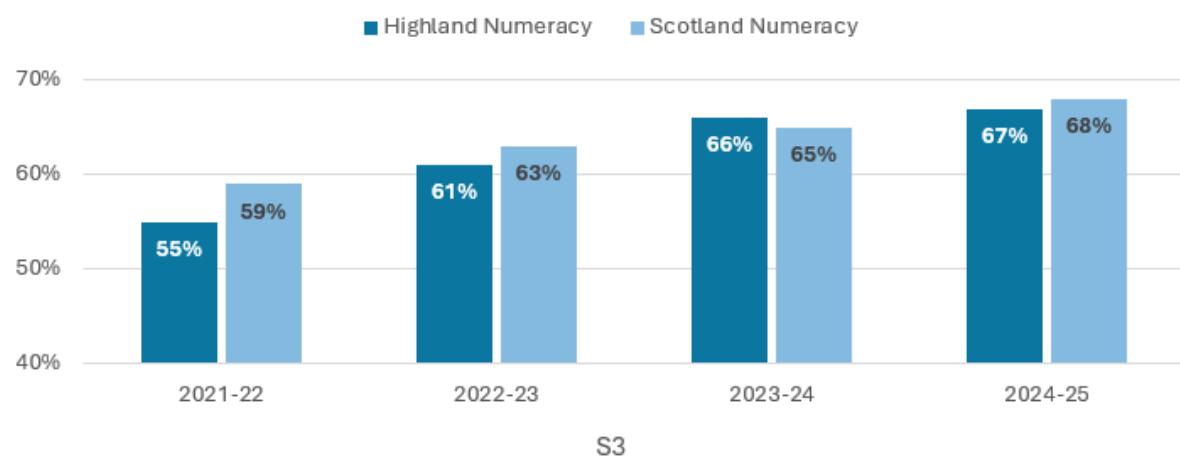
Third Level or better Numeracy	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Numeracy	88%	89%	89%	91%
Scotland Numeracy	89%	90%	90%	91%

Highland Literacy and Scotland Numeracy - Third Level or better



Fourth Level or better Numeracy	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Highland Numeracy	55%	61%	66%	67%
Scotland Numeracy	59%	63%	65%	68%

Highland Literacy and Scotland Numeracy - Fourth Level or better



Poverty Related Attainment Gap

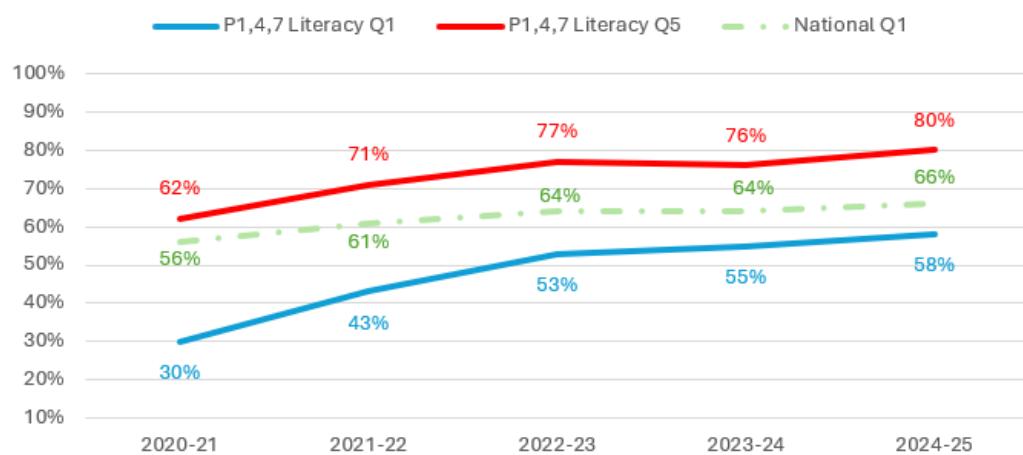
ACEL Primary Data

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a relative measure of deprivation. SIMD is the Scottish Government's standard approach to identify areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland. It can help improve understanding about the outcomes and circumstances of people living in the most deprived areas in Scotland.

The charts below show attainment in literacy and numeracy for Primary stage pupils living in Highland's most deprived data zones, with an increase of 28% in literacy and 19% in numeracy since 2021. It should also be noted that the gap between the least and most advantaged learners has narrowed by 10% in Literacy and 7% in Numeracy since 2020/21.

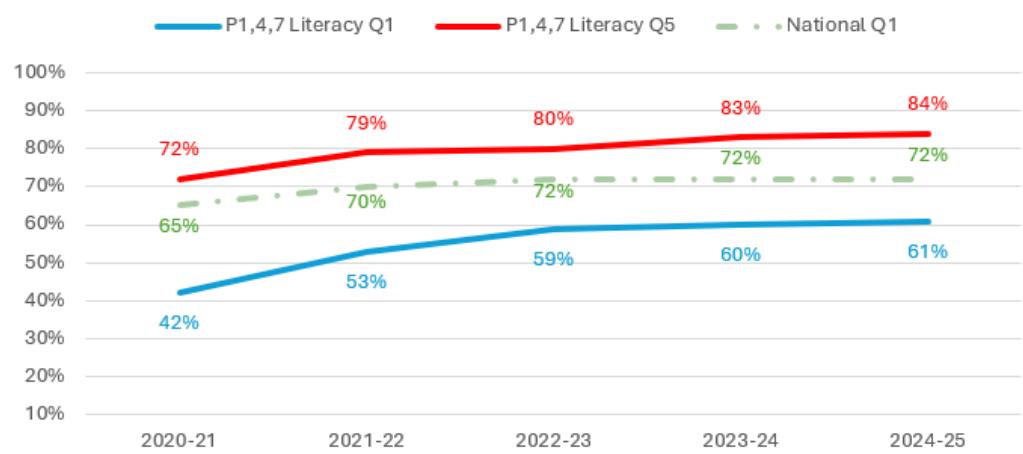
ACEL Attainment Literacy Gap	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
P1,4,7 Literacy Q1	30%	43%	53%	55%	58%
P1,4,7 Literacy Q5	62%	71%	77%	76%	80%
National Q1	56%	61%	64%	64%	66%

Highland Literacy Attainment Gap trend



ACEL Attainment Numeracy Gap	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
P1,4,7 Literacy Q1	42%	53%	59%	60%	61%
P1,4,7 Literacy Q5	72%	79%	80%	83%	84%
National Q1	65%	70%	72%	72%	72%

Highland Numeracy Attainment Gap trend



Stretch Aims

Every Local Authority in Scotland is required to submit aspirational three year 'stretch aims' for specific core measures, as determined by the Scottish Government. The core stretch aims in Highland, detailed below, were agreed by Education Committee in February 2023 and approved by the Scottish Government thereafter. They articulate ambitious but achievable aims and have been supported and challenged through professional dialogue with Education Scotland to drive improved outcomes for all children and young people in Highland.

The table below shows Highland stretch aims and progress towards these aims.

Highland Stretch Aims for P1,P4, P7 (combined) Literacy and Numeracy ACEL.

		2022-23 (published)	2023-24 (published)	2024-25 Stretch aim	2024-25 (published)	2025-26 Stretch aim
ACEL Literacy combined P1,4 & 7	Overall	65%	69%	69%	69%	71%
	SIMD Q1	53%	55%	58%	58%	60%
	SIMD Q5	77%	76%	78%	80%	79%
	Gap (Q1-Q5)	22%	21%	20%	22%	19%
ACEL Numeracy combined P1,4 & 7	Overall	72%	74%	77%	74%	79%
	SIMD Q1	59%	60%	64%	61%	66%
	SIMD Q5	80%	83%	81%	84%	82%
	Gap (Q1-Q5)	21%	23%	17%	23%	16%

ACEL S3 Data

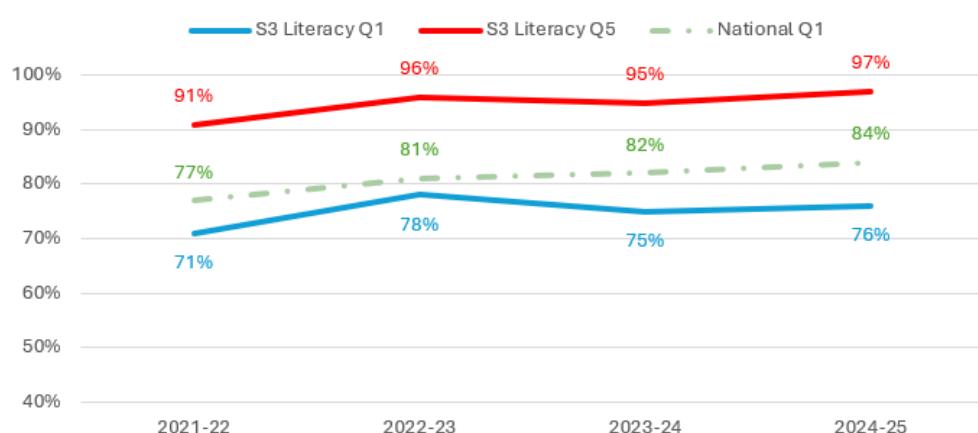
The charts below show attainment in literacy for Secondary stage 3 pupils living in Highland's most and least deprived data zones. This provides attainment gap information over time for literacy at ACEL levels 3+ and level 4.

Attainment in Literacy at level 3 for children living in our most deprived data zones has increased by 5% since 2022 however a gap remains between those in most and least advantaged learners.

Attainment in Numeracy at Level 4 for children living in our most deprived areas has improved by 12% since 2022 however the gap between those in the most and least advantaged learners has increased by 4%.

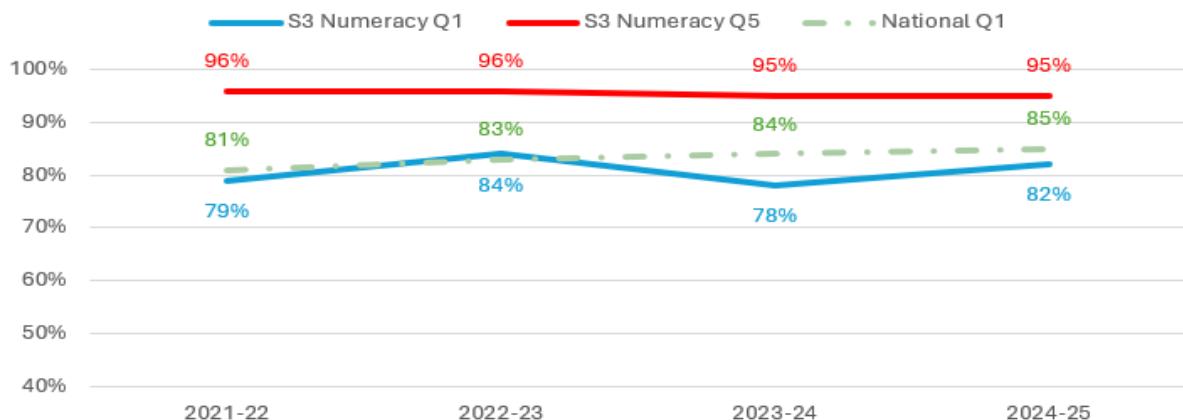
ACEL Attainment Level 3 Literacy Gap	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
S3 Literacy Q1	71%	78%	75%	76%
S3 Literacy Q5	91%	96%	95%	97%
National Q1	77%	81%	82%	84%

Highland Literacy Attainment Gap trend - Third level



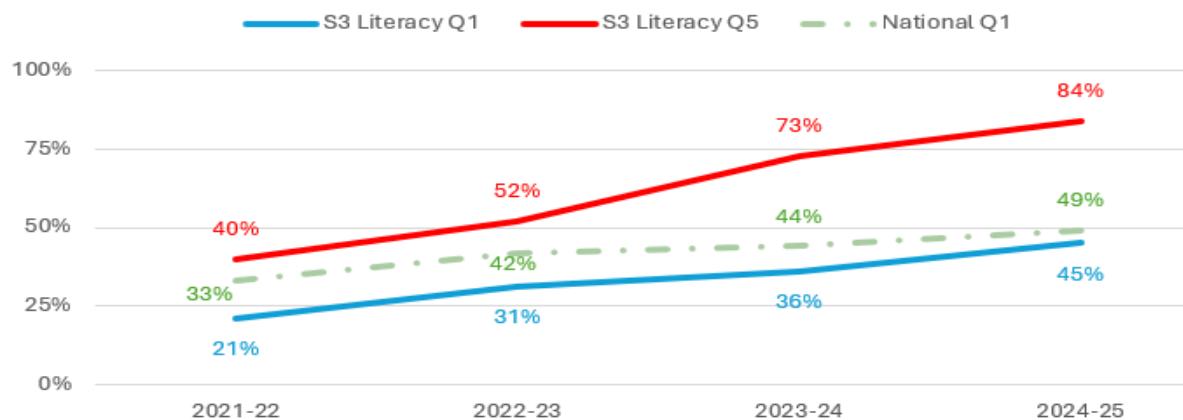
ACEL Attainment Level 3 Numeracy Gap	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
S3 Numeracy Q1	79%	84%	78%	82%
S3 Numeracy Q5	96%	96%	95%	95%
National Q1	81%	83%	84%	85%

Highland Numeracy Attainment Gap trend - Third level



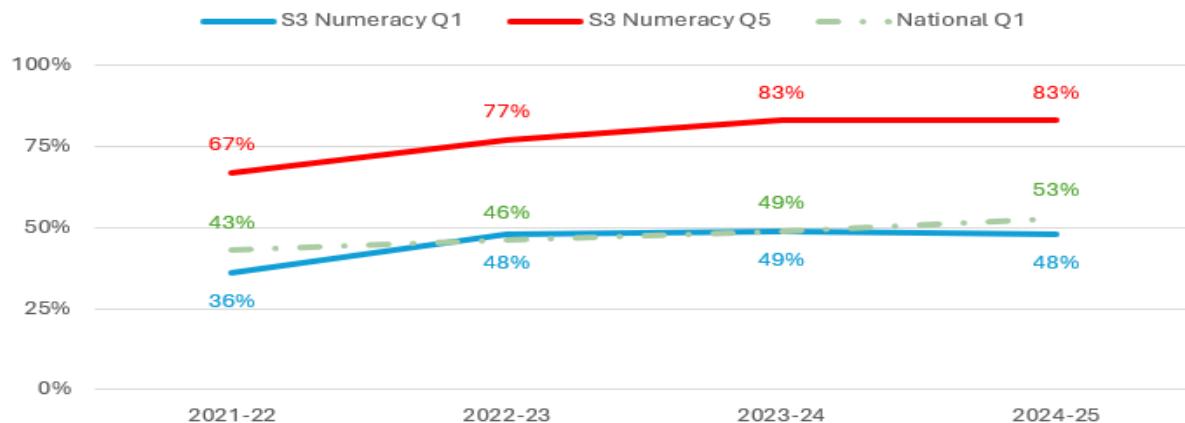
ACEL Attainment Level 4 Literacy Gap	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
S3 Literacy Q1	21%	31%	36%	45%
S3 Literacy Q5	40%	52%	73%	84%
National Q1	33%	42%	44%	49%

Highland Literacy Attainment Gap trend - Fourth level



ACEL Attainment Level 4 Numeracy Gap	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
S3 Numeracy Q1	36%	48%	49%	48%
S3 Numeracy Q5	67%	77%	83%	83%
National Q1	43%	46%	49%	53%

Highland Numeracy Attainment Gap trend - Fourth level



Raised Attainment and Continuous Improvement

The Education and Learning Service has a robust Raising Attainment and Achievement Strategy (RAAS) and associated Education and Learning Improvement Plan (ELIP) to support continuous improvement across all schools.

The restructure of the Education and Learning Service and the introduction of a new Quality Improvement Team affords the opportunity to apply more rigour in support and challenge of School Improvement.

The Raising Attainment Reference Group (RARG) and Raising Attainment Board are in place and now support the work of the RAAS with the RARG engaging in focused development work in relation to Data Analysis for Improvement.

All actions to improve attainment are augmented by partnership working with the Education Scotland Attainment Adviser and with wider partners through the Integrated Children's Services Plan. In addition, it is anticipated that the work and calls to action from the Poverty and Equality Commission will assist in strengthening our position and ensuring a renewed focus on the work needed to close the poverty related attainment gap, as defined within the National Improvement Framework and to meet the duties of the Equality Act and UNCRC.

ACEL data is generally progressing on an improving trajectory and continuing to move in the right direction within the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF). Improving The Highland Council Schools position by 2 places since 2023 in Literacy; 1 place in Numeracy for Primary ACEL data and 2 places for S3 level of above in Literacy and 6 places for Numeracy.