S5. 2024 Leavers' Attainment Outcomes Report

The Committee considered a report by the Director of Education Services which provided an update on the attainment outcomes of Falkirk Council secondary school Leavers in 2024, an overview of the combined Senior Phase Leavers' attainment (S4–S6), and highlighted overall performance trends.

The Committee noted that a refreshed Attainment Strategy was in development and requested further information regarding this. The Head of Education, Jill Pringle, advised that there was intensive dialogue with school leadership teams across the district regarding areas of strength and areas of focus which facilitated the development of improvement plans which suited the unique attainment profiles of schools.

The Committee noted that there was a decrease in the number of Leavers who moved on to further education, but an increase in the number who moved onto employment and higher education and asked for further information on this. The Head of Education advised that all three of these were seen as positive destinations, but there tended to be an annual variation in these numbers depending on the particular cohort of young people involved. She added that schools now provided a wider range of Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) qualifications, which may explain why there were fewer Leavers who moved on to further education. As a follow-up question, the Committee asked about the distinction between Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) qualifications and SCQF qualifications. The Head of Education advised that the SQA was the main awarding body for accreditations in Scotland, whereas SCQF was an independent framework which benchmarked all Scottish qualifications, allowing comparisons to be made.

The Committee noted the link between strong attendance and strong attainment, and asked what work was being undertaken in this area. The Head of Education advised that school attendance was a national issue and there was a universal focus on attendance in Falkirk schools, particularly following the recovery from the pandemic. She noted that there would be more detail provided on this during the next agenda item.

The Committee asked requested further information on the Virtual Comparator referred to in the report. The Head of Education advised that the Virtual Comparator was the most realistic benchmark for analysing the attainment data. She explained that every Falkirk Council Leaver had a unique profile of characteristics, including their gender, stage, additional support needs, and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) postcode which impacted their attainment. The Virtual Comparator drew ten other pupils in Scotland with the exact same characteristics as a Falkirk Council Leaver and averaged their outcomes – and then repeated this for every Leaver. This provided a like-for-like analysis of whether Falkirk Council had added value to a Leaver, compared to similar Leavers from other local authorities.

The Committee noted that Falkirk outperformed the Virtual Comparator by a significant margin, more than it had over the last five years, and asked for further information on this. The Head of Education advised that the last five years had seen data literacy practices more strongly embedded in schools, which allowed tailored improvement plans to be developed. The Committee asked about specific areas where significant improvements had been made. The Head of Education advised that the percentage of Falkirk Council Leavers who entered a positive destination figure was the highest it had ever been and outperformed the Virtual Comparator for the first time in five years. She added that Literacy and Numeracy data for Leavers was particularly strong.

The Committee requested more information on tariff scores. The Head of Education advised that the Insight tool used in schools analysed the size and difficulty of a qualification and assigned it a score. Every qualification a Leaver had in their portfolio was then assigned a score and these were added together to create a total tariff score. She noted that the complementary tariff score referred to in the report only took the score of a Leaver's best five qualifications, and therefore didn't capture the breadth of their learning. The Committee noted the gap between the Falkirk Council and the Virtual Comparator in regard to complementary tariff scores and asked about the actions in place to improve this. The Head of Education noted that pace, challenge and transferable skills were a key focus in this area. She also highlighted that this data had undergone statistical significance testing and the gap between Falkirk Council and the Virtual Comparator was not significant. The Director of Education added that the gap equated to around half of a National 4 qualification. He stressed that the total tariff score was the most realistic measure of a Leaver's learning, and the complementary tariff score was a mechanism for examining individual subjects and grades in more detail.

The Committee asked how a Leaver's progress was monitored after they reached an initial positive destination. The Director of Education advised that this was a planned process which young people were supported through. He noted that the Council and Forth Valley College sat on the Strategic Advisory Board to support young people moving into further education. He also noted that those Leavers who were unable to move into a positive destination in time for the capture date were supported to transition into a positive destination when they were ready.

The Committee asked about the breakdown of attainment by subject. The Director of Education advised that there was data on this, and this could potentially be explored in the future.

The Committee asked about the impact of digital transformation on attainment. The Director of Education advised that this undoubtedly had a positive impact on attainment, as pupils could access their learning resources at any time, access feedback from teachers and catch up on any missed learning.

The Convener and the Portfolio Holder commended Education staff for their extensive work in achieving the excellent outcomes detailed in the report.

Decision

The Committee:-

(1) noted the strong levels of attainment achieved by Falkirk Council secondary school leavers in 2024;

(2) noted the key areas for improvement identified and the strategies in place to support further progress, and

(3) requested that the Director of Education liaises with the Convener and the Democratic Services Manager to determine a method for a 'deep dive' into education matters, with a specific focus on attainment.