
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

8 September 2020

Cabinet

Title:	Update report on SQA exam results process 2020
Purpose:	To provide Cabinet with an initial report on SQA results in North Ayrshire in 2020 and to provide an update on current and future developments in relation to qualifications
Recommendation:	<p>It is recommended that Cabinet:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(i) Notes the report; and(ii) Receives a further, more detailed attainment analysis later in the year, following the publication of Insight and LGBF benchmarking data.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The SQA examination timetable for 2020 was cancelled by the Scottish Government in March 2020 resulting in estimate grades which are provided every year by school becoming the sole means by which grades would be determined by SQA in 2020.
- 1.2 Results were initially published to all candidates on 4 August 2020. Following an intense representation of views as to the fairness and equity of the awarding process, the Deputy First Minister announced in Parliament on 11 August 2020 that SQA had been instructed to change the previously notified approach to certification this year and instead award candidate results based solely on the estimates provided by schools and colleges.
- 1.3 The second and final set of awards demonstrate an improved performance by young people in North Ayrshire Schools, higher than in previous years.
- 1.4 A revised appeals process has been introduced by the SQA.

2. Background

Process for arriving at SQA results in 2020

- 2.1 On 19 March 2020, it was announced in the Scottish Parliament that the SQA examination timetable would be unable to go ahead this year, as a direct consequence of COVID-19. This is the first time since they were introduced 132 years ago that Scotland's exam diet has been cancelled.

- 2.2 Schools closed across the country on 20 March 2020, following a directive from Scottish Government. Initially, the SQA maintained an expectation that candidates would still complete outstanding coursework due to be submitted in April, but this requirement was subsequently withdrawn by SQA on 24 March 2020.
- 2.3 On 2 April 2020, the SQA released information on how grades would be awarded this year in the absence of the normal exam diet. The estimate grades which are provided every year by schools became the sole means by which grades would be determined by SQA in 2020. Schools were asked to provide estimates, based not only on evidence held of actual performance but also on inferred attainment. A link to the SQA guidance issued to schools is provided [here](#).
- 2.4 North Ayrshire Council provided specific additional guidance to schools, based on the SQA documentation, to ensure that a consistent approach was adopted across all schools in the production and internal moderation of estimate grades.
- 2.5 Estimate grades were submitted by all schools to SQA by 29 May 2020, following which they were subject to a moderation process at SQA. This process was designed to ensure that there were no significant shifts in attainment levels in 2020 on a system-wide level. SQA did not initially publish details of this moderation process, but this information subsequently became available following the publication of candidate results on 4 August 2020 and is accessible [here](#).

Publication of SQA Results

- 2.6 Results were initially published to all candidates on 4 August 2020. This included over 15,000 results in North Ayrshire for over 4,200 senior phase candidates. At National 2-4, candidates received the results awarded by the school. At National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, some candidates' results were moderated up or down by SQA.
- 2.7 Whilst at an authority-wide level, the overall attainment picture was generally positive in comparison to previous years, there were some examples of candidates receiving markedly different results from those submitted by the school. There was media interest in the perceived inequity in the awarding process, in that candidates from more deprived areas were more likely to have been disadvantaged as a result of the process. In response to this, an initial analysis of North Ayrshire's results was carried out. In total, in North Ayrshire, 3,990 grades were awarded that were below the school estimates. Overall, for learners living in the most deprived areas, 33% of the final grades of this group were lower than school estimates, compared with 32% of the final grades of all other learners (or 29% of the final grades of learners living in the most affluent areas of North Ayrshire). The difference was more pronounced at Higher than at other levels.
- 2.8 Following similar experiences being reported across the country, and intense representation of views as to the fairness and equity of the awarding process in 2020, the Deputy First Minister announced in Parliament on 11 August 2020 that SQA had been instructed to change the previous approach to certification this year and instead award candidate results based solely on the estimates provided by schools and colleges. Importantly, it was announced that the results of those learners who were awarded a higher grade originally would also be maintained.
- 2.9 Following this statement and the start of the school term on Wednesday 12 August 2020, North Ayrshire schools shared the updated results with all their learners individually. Updated certificates will be issued by SQA in the near future. The updated

national results summary was subsequently published by SQA on 31 August 2020 and is available [here](#).

- 2.10 Analysis of this year's SQA results is ongoing. Nevertheless, an initial overview of results for 2020 is outlined in the tables below.

Pass rates (A-C) as a percentage of entries:

Qualification	2018	2019	2020 (original)	2020 (updated)
National 5	70%	73%	76%	86%
Higher	70%	64%	72%	87%
Adv. Higher	74%	66%	78%	89%

In terms of breadth and depth, the following selected measures are highlighted for information. Please note this is cohort data based on the current attainment in that year, and not leavers' data:

Breadth and Depth as a percentage of pupils in each year group:

Stage	Qualification	2018	2019	2020 (original)	2020 (updated)
S4	At least 1 National 5	76%	78%	79%	81%
	At least 3 National 5s	49%	53%	56%	62%
	At least 5 National 5s	30%	32%	37%	45%
S5	At least 1 Higher	54%	50%	52%	57%
	At least 3 Highers	30%	26%	27%	34%
	At least 5 Highers	12%	11%	11%	14%
S6	At least 1 Adv. Higher	17%	16%	18%	20%
	At least 3 Adv. Highers	1%	1%	1%	2%

- 2.11 In 2020, 147 care experienced young people in North Ayrshire achieved over 650 qualifications., including: 128 National 3 awards; 198 National 4 awards; 267 National 5 awards; 66 Higher awards and 4 Advanced Higher awards. A further, more detailed analysis will be included in the subsequent report brought to Cabinet later in the year.
- 2.12 At this stage, we do not have access to the full analytical tools provided by the national Insight Benchmarking Tool. Our current data shows only raw results for National 2 – Advanced Higher qualifications and does not include the broad range of additional qualifications which have increasingly been offered in our schools tailored to individual need and interest. A full report will be brought to Cabinet, in line with our standard reporting timescales, following the publication of Insight data later in the year and analysis of the full attainment picture for North Ayrshire schools. It is important to note that, given the very unique circumstances of this year and the change to the normal awarding methodology, care will need to be taken if making direct comparisons of this year's attainment data with other years.

Appeals Process and Next Steps

- 2.13 A revised SQA Appeals process is in place. Appeals will be submitted to the SQA following a school's review of each request against the criteria laid down by the examining body. It is expected that this will result in few appeals. SQA has devised a timetable for submission and their response.
- 2.14 At present, SQA have undertaken a consultation exercise designed to gauge views on the exam diet for 20/21 and the requirements for internal and exam arrangements. It is understood that they have received a number of responses and are working through these before publishing new arrangements.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

- (i) Notes the report; and
- (ii) Receives a further, more detailed attainment analysis later in the year, following the publication of Insight and LGBF benchmarking data.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

- 4.1 None.

Human Resources

- 4.2 None.

Legal

- 4.3 None.

Equality/Socio-economic

- 4.4 None.

Environmental and Sustainability

- 4.5 None.

Key Priorities

- 4.6 Children and young people have the best start in life.

Community Wealth Building

- 4.7 None.

5. Consultation

5.1 None.

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Background Papers

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