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# NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

2 June 2026

## Cabinet (Education)

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**Title:** School Leavers' Attainment and Achievement 2025

**Purpose:** To update Cabinet on the overall performance of the 2024-25 cohort of North Ayrshire Council school leavers.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a) Notes the content of the report, including the achievements of school leavers in qualifications in 2025; and
- b) Notes the measures being taken to make further improvements to attainment and achievement levels across NAC Secondary schools.

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### 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 In 2025, NAC had a strong overall performance in literacy and numeracy attainment, with 92% of school leavers achieving Level 4 in both measures. Performance in literacy at Level 5 remains a strength, while Level 5 numeracy has dipped slightly in the most recent year, leading to focused improvement work across schools.
- 1.2 The average total tariff score rose to 864, showing renewed improvement in overall attainment. North Ayrshire school leavers are outperforming the national figures across a range of SIMD deciles. Outcomes for leavers in the most deprived communities remain a relative strength, with strong performance across several deprivation measures. The priority is to sustain this progress while improving attainment across all deciles.
- 1.3 Across a range of measures of breadth and depth, North Ayrshire leavers continue to perform well when benchmarked against the virtual comparator, Quad partner authorities and the national cohort. Particular highlights include the percentage of learners who left with at least five qualifications at level 3 or better, and the percentage who left with at least five level 6 qualifications or better.
- 1.4 Positive destinations remain very strong at 95.7%, above the virtual comparator and in line with national performance. Maintaining this strength, especially for the most deprived learners, remains an important priority for the service and one which will be supported by the integration of the Employability Service into the Education Directorate.
- 1.5 Targeted and universal improvement actions in 2024-25 focused on high-quality pedagogy, data led improvement, equity, and partnership working. For 2025-26 and beyond, priorities include stronger use of data, improved tracking and monitoring, enhanced curriculum pathways using the SCQF, and a sharper focus on breadth, depth,

and consistency of attainment, underpinned by the Education Service's updated three-year Improvement Plan.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 The performance information in this paper is collated from three key sources:
- The [Local Government Benchmarking Framework \(LGBF\)](#) which lists a range of performance indicators for all 32 local authorities across Scotland, allowing performance to be considered relative to others.
  - The ScotXed INSIGHT Benchmarking Tool, which is produced for schools and education authorities to enable analysis and improvement planning across all key national measures of attainment.
  - The Scottish Government annual publication: [Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations, No.8: 2026 edition](#)
- 2.2 Schools in North Ayrshire focus on the attainment for each learner by the end of the Senior Phase (exit qualifications), rather than solely on the individual year on year attainment pattern. The attainment of each learner across their Senior Phase is more important than what they achieve in a single year (except for S4 leavers).
- 2.3 The attainment data in this paper relates to the attainment of school leavers who left school in session 2024-25, which includes leavers up to Christmas 2025. This is the most up to date school leaver attainment and reflects what was published in February/March 2026 in the sources named above.
- 2.4 The number of school leavers in academic session 2024-25 was 1396. This is the second lowest number of school leavers in the last 5 years. The percentage of S4 leavers has decreased from 2024 whilst the percentage of S5 and S6 leavers are broadly in line with the last 3 years.

### Leavers by stage

Year	S4	S5	S6	All leavers
2020-21	128 (9.3%)	383 (27.9%)	862 (62.8%)	1373
2021-22	172 (11.3%)	469 (30.9%)	879 (57.8%)	1520
2022-23	216 (14.7%)	438 (29.8%)	814 (55.4%)	1468
2023-24	212 (13.6%)	488 (31.3%)	859 (55.1%)	1559
2024-25	182 (13.0%)	435 (31.2%)	779 (55.8%)	1396

- 2.5 This paper will consider the performance of North Ayrshire schools as a group, identifying trends and key highlights or areas for improvement in the following measures of attainment:
- School leaver attainment in literacy and numeracy
  - The average total tariff scores of school leavers
  - School leaver attainment levels in the context of deprivation
  - The breadth and depth of qualifications attained by school leavers
  - School leaver initial positive destinations
- 2.6 Throughout this report, the attainment of North Ayrshire school leavers is benchmarked against the following comparators:
- Previous NAC performance
  - Performance of the virtual comparator
  - Performance of other local authorities

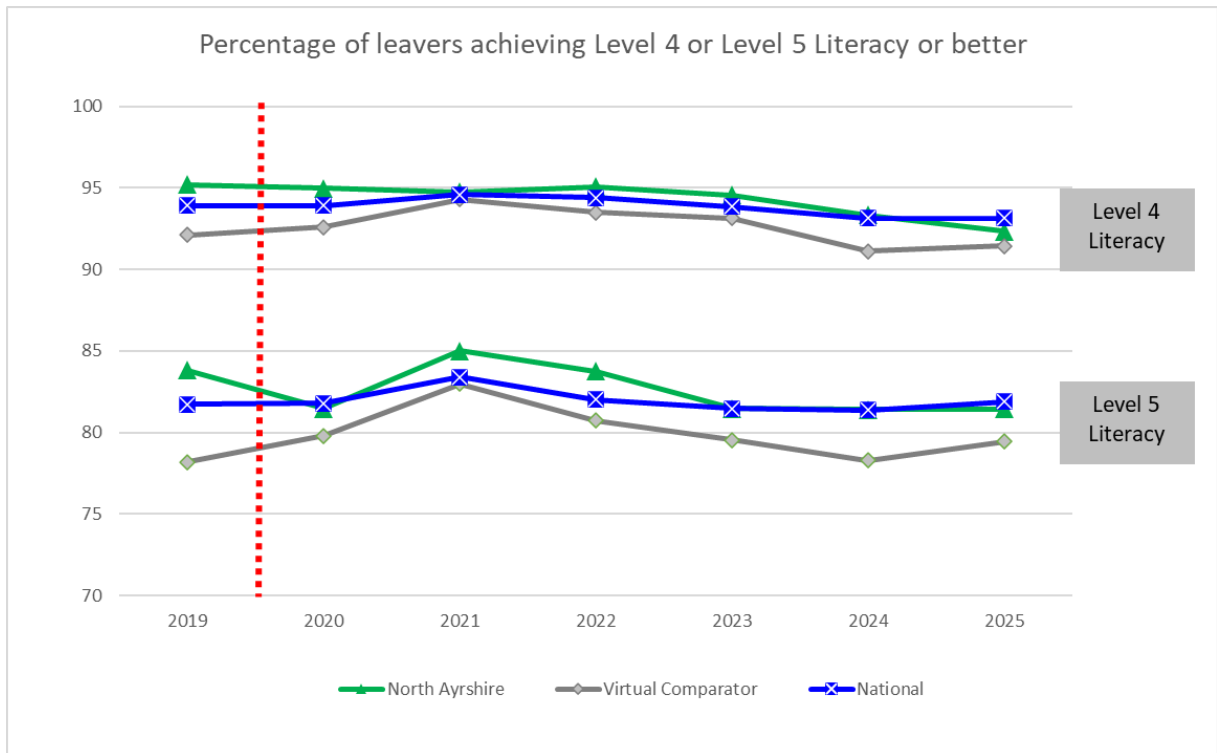
- Performance at national level

2.7 To support understanding of technical terminology, a glossary of key terms used throughout this report is included at Appendix 1.

## 2.8 Improving attainment in Literacy and Numeracy

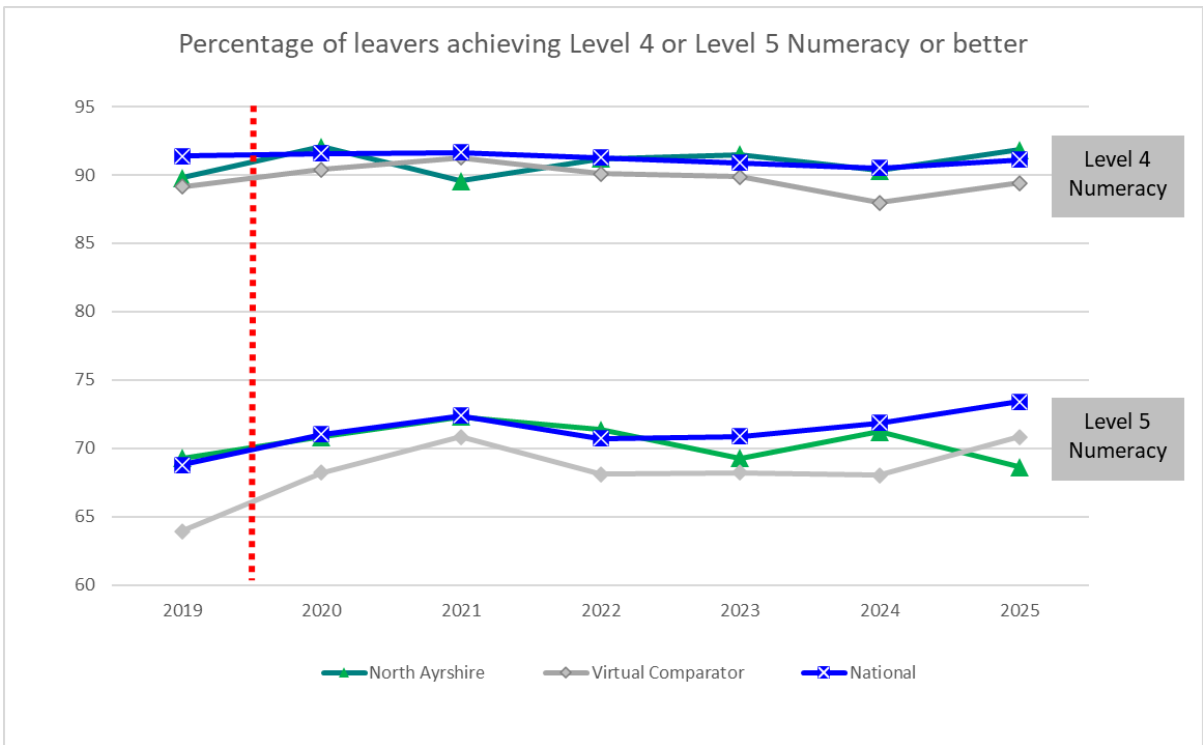
### All Leavers Achieving Literacy

North Ayrshire leavers continue to perform well in literacy. At both level 4 and level 5 literacy, the NAC performance has been consistently above the virtual comparator and above or broadly aligned to the national performance since 2019. In 2025, 92% of leavers achieved at least level 4 literacy, and 81% achieved at least level 5 literacy. Targets have been set to increase both of these figures for next session.



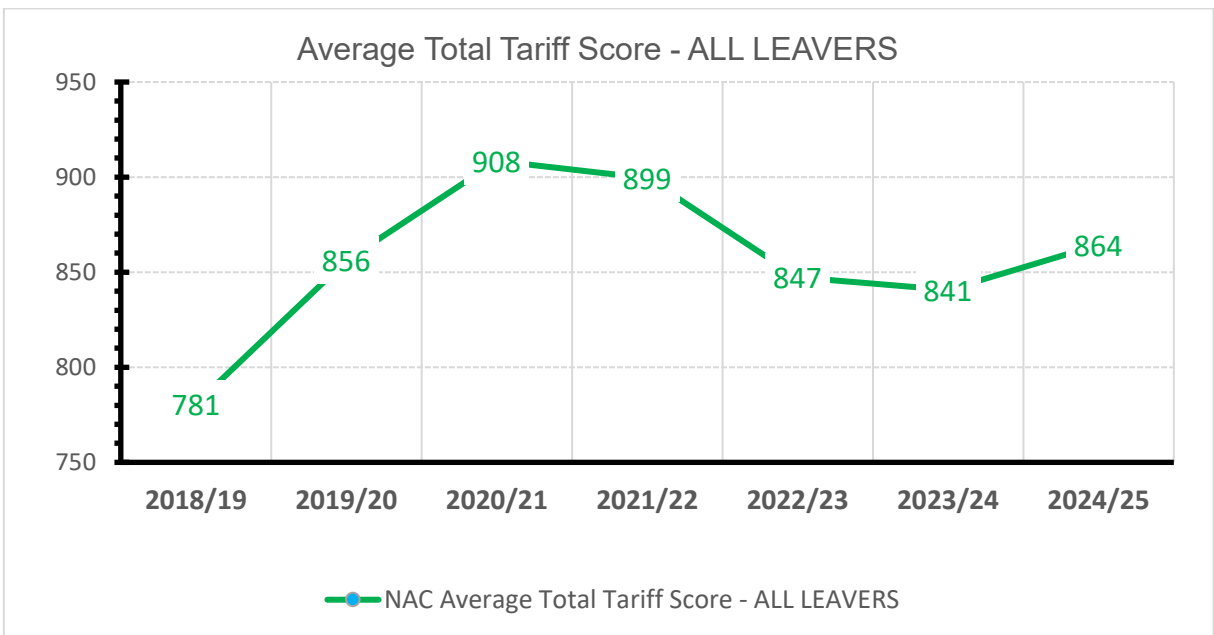
### All Leavers Achieving Numeracy

In six out of the last seven years, North Ayrshire leavers have outperformed the virtual comparator in level 4 numeracy. With the exception of 2021, NAC performance has been broadly the same as the national figure over the same period. Indeed, in 2025 the NAC performance (92%) was higher than both the national and virtual comparators. The performance of North Ayrshire’s leavers in level 5 numeracy has historically tracked above the virtual comparator and in line with national figures. However, there has been a slight decline in attainment in 2025 for this measure to 69%. Targets have been set to improve this performance for next session.



## 2.9 Improving attainment for all

This measure focuses on **the average total tariff score** of the candidate’s latest and best qualifications, and is one of our Council Plan Performance Indicators. Tariff points are assigned to each unit or course achieved by learners – in all SCQF-graded awards, not just those provided by SQA (now Qualifications Scotland). This acknowledges to a greater extent the drive towards wider achievement qualifications and encourages schools to offer curricular choices and learner pathways tailored to a variety of abilities and aspirations. The data source for this measure is the ScotXed Insight benchmarking tool.



Various alternative certification models (ACMs) were in place for 2020 until 2023. The “hump” in performance was anticipated. Exam arrangements returned to “normal” for 2024, which is the first year which can be reliably compared with the pre-pandemic

performance in 2019, the last time when “normal” exam arrangements were in place. In 2025, the overall average total tariff score for all leavers has begun to rise again, up to 864 (the highest level over this period outside of the ACMs).

### Average Total Tariff Score of leavers according to attainment group

It is common practice to look below the headline average total tariff figure to see the performance of three groups of school leavers: the lowest attaining 20%, the middle attaining 60% and the highest attaining 20%. The table below shows the performance of these groups over the last 5 years for which data is available.

### School Leavers Average total tariff points in North Ayrshire

(compared to Virtual Comparator and Scotland / data source = ScotXed Insight):

	2010-21			2021-22			2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
	NAC	VC	Scot	NAC	VC	Scot	NAC	VC	Scot	NAC	VC	Scot	NAC	VC	Scot
Lowest 20%	160	157	164	155	140	154	133	127	141	123	100	129	115	108	132
Middle 60%	840	873	939	812	804	871	744	766	832	738	749	841	779	800	874
Highest 20%	1860	1910	1982	1907	1876	1950	1869	1866	1931	1865	1840	1928	1866	1892	1965

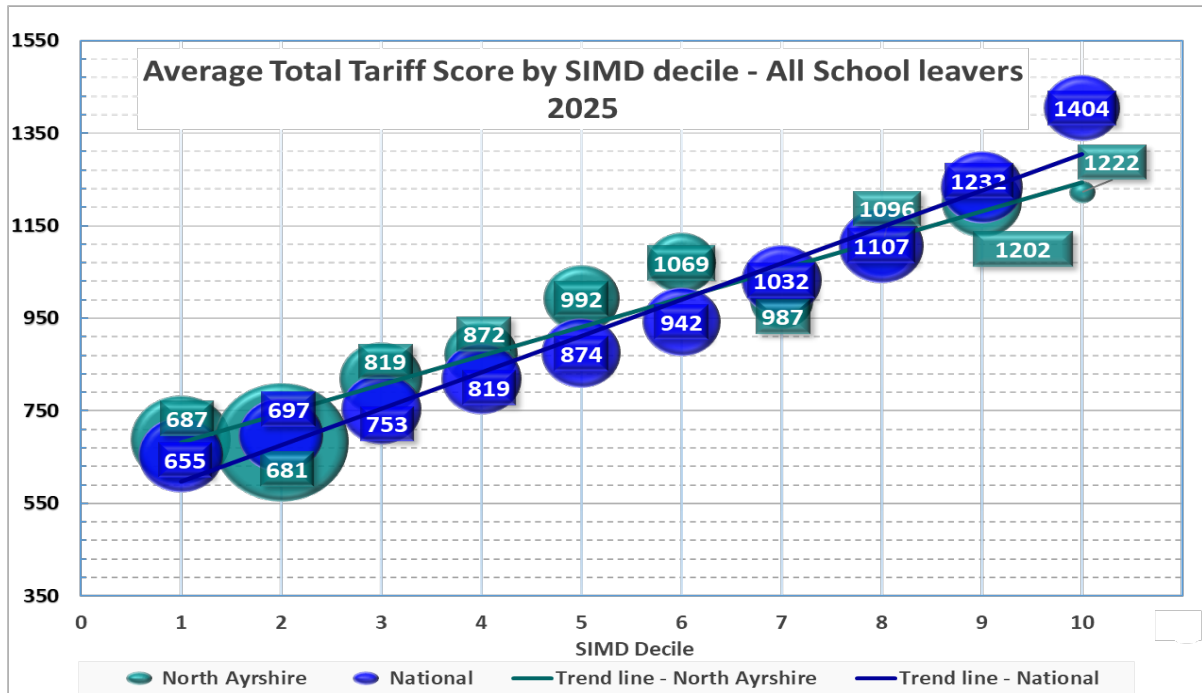
In 2025, the average total tariff score for the lowest attaining 20% of learners is above the Virtual Comparator and slightly below the national figure. The average total tariff score of the middle attaining 60% of leavers is slightly lower than the virtual comparator and the national figure, but 41 points higher than the previous year. The average total tariff score of the highest attaining 20% of leavers is also below both the virtual comparator and the national figure, and very slightly (one point) higher than the previous year.

### 2.10 Attainment versus Deprivation: average total tariff score of leavers according to SIMD decile

There is a strong focus both nationally and locally on trying to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap. The graph below displays the average total tariff score of leavers in 2025, depending on the SIMD decile of their postcode. The larger the circle, the larger the size of the group of leavers. The North Ayrshire leavers cohort is in green and the national cohort is in blue. While the distribution of leavers across all ten SIMD deciles is relatively even across Scotland, the size of the leavers groups in North Ayrshire is much larger at the lower end of the SIMD graph. Indeed, 43% (560) of our school leavers in 2025 lived in SIMD deciles 1 and 2. In contrast, only 11% of North Ayrshire’s leavers in 2025 lived in SIMD deciles 9 and 10 (this equates to 153 learners).

North Ayrshire school leavers are outperforming the national figures across a range of SIMD deciles. Across deciles 1-6, the average total tariff score in North Ayrshire was almost entirely in line with or above the national figure, in some cases by a statistically significant margin (e.g. SIMD decile 6). In contrast, at SIMD decile 10, the North Ayrshire performance was well below the national figure. It should be noted that the NAC figure is based on only 14 individuals and represents 1% of the leavers cohort, compared to 9% nationally. Improving attainment across all deciles remains a priority

for the service, alongside the other priorities in the new Education Service Improvement Plan.



## 2.11 Breadth and Depth of qualifications attained

Breadth and depth measures show the percentage of leavers who left with a minimum number of qualifications at a particular level. To aid further comparative analysis, we have included figures from our Quad partners (Dundee City, Glasgow City and North Lanarkshire). Quads are an ADES construct intended to improve performance across all local authorities, and are formed by creating partnerships based upon shared characteristics. The figures in the tables below show the collated attainment levels of the Quad members *except* North Ayrshire.

### 5 or more at Level 3

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	91%	90%	89%	88%	89%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>89%</b>
Virtual Comparator	91%	89%	88%	86%	87%
Quad Partners	89%	88%	87%	87%	87%

Over the last five years, the proportion of North Ayrshire school leavers who left with five or more qualifications at level 3 or better has been in line with or higher than the national figure every year. Similarly, North Ayrshire leavers performed better than the virtual comparator and leavers from our three other Quad partner authorities at this level.

#### 5 or more at Level 4

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	87%	87%	85%	84%	84%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>81%</b>
Virtual Comparator	87%	85%	84%	81%	82%
Quad Partners	85%	84%	83%	82%	83%

Performance at Level 4 is more mixed. While the percentage of learners leaving with at least five level 4 qualifications has declined slightly both nationally and locally, the North Ayrshire performance has dipped below the virtual comparator and our Quad partner authorities in 2025. This is a clear area for improvement which will be addressed through the service improvement plan programme of targeted work on raising attainment.

#### 1 or more at Level 5

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	89%	89%	88%	87%	88%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>87%</b>
Virtual Comparator	89%	88%	88%	84%	86%
Quad Partners	87%	86%	86%	85%	86%

The percentage of school leavers who achieve at least one level 5 qualification (e.g. National 5 level) is a key national performance indicator. North Ayrshire has performed well in this measure over the last five years, remaining broadly in line with the national performance, and above the virtual comparator and Quad partner authorities.

#### 5 or more at Level 5

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	71%	68%	66%	67%	69%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>64%</b>
Virtual Comparator	69%	65%	63%	62%	66%
Quad Partners	64%	62%	61%	61%	65%

This measure is included in the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF). At 64% of leavers attaining at least five level 5 qualifications in 2025, North Ayrshire is in 20<sup>th</sup> position out of all 32 local authorities, which is an increase on our long-term average relative position of 22. The percentage of learners leaving school with at least five level 5 qualifications (e.g. National 5s) has fluctuated somewhat over the last five years, both locally and nationally. As a result, a specific focus will be maintained on this measure. Schools will be required to set specific targets to increase the proportion of learners leaving with at least five National 5 qualifications.

When filtered for deprivation (not displayed in table), 54% of North Ayrshire's leavers from the 20% most deprived areas by SIMD achieve at least five level 5 qualifications. This is above the national figure of 53% and puts North Ayrshire in 11<sup>th</sup> position overall relative to all local authorities in Scotland.

### 1 or more at Level 6

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	70%	67%	66%	66%	68%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>69%</b>
Virtual Comparator	69%	65%	66%	64%	66%
Quad Partners*	67%	63%	63%	63%	65%

The percentage of school leavers who achieve at least one level 6 qualification (e.g. Higher level) is a key national performance indicator. North Ayrshire has performed well in this measure over the last five years, remaining in line with or above the national performance, and above the virtual comparator and Quad partner authorities.

### 5 or more at Level 6

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	42%	39%	38%	39%	41%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>40%</b>
Virtual Comparator	38%	35%	35%	34%	37%
Quad Partners*	37%	34%	34%	35%	37%

This measure is included in the LGBF. At 40% of leavers attaining at least five level 6 qualifications in 2025, North Ayrshire is in 12<sup>th</sup> position out of all 32 local authorities, against a long-term average relative position of 23. There has been a notable improvement in North Ayrshire's performance at level 6 (equivalent to Higher) in 2025. Indeed, over the last five years, North Ayrshire leavers have performed better than the virtual comparator and Quad partner authorities.

When filtered for deprivation (not displayed in table), 29% of North Ayrshire's leavers from the 20% most deprived areas by SIMD achieve at least five level 6 qualifications. This is significantly above the national figure of 24% and puts North Ayrshire in 4<sup>th</sup> position relative to all local authorities in Scotland.

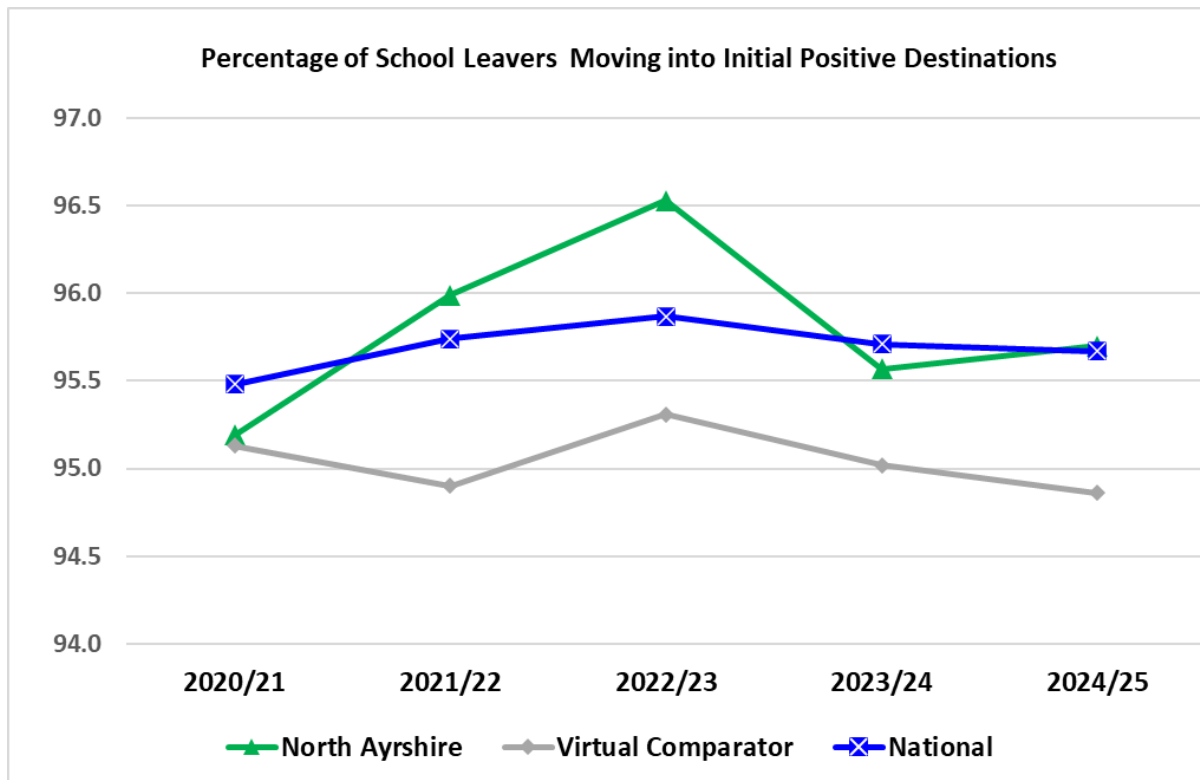
### 1 or more at Level 7

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
National	28%	26%	25%	25%	26%
<b>North Ayrshire</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>22%</b>
Virtual Comparator	25%	23%	20%	21%	24%
Quad Partners	23%	21%	22%	22%	25%

In 2025, 22% of learners in North Ayrshire left school with at least one level 7 qualification (equivalent to Advanced Higher). This is consistent with the previous year, but a change from the previous comparative position, which had been generally in line with or above the virtual comparator and Quad partner authorities. At 22%, North Ayrshire's performance in this measure is still significantly higher than the pre-pandemic years, where the figure tended to be between 18-19% on average in the five years to 2019. Nevertheless, a specific focus will be maintained on this measure. Schools will be required to set specific targets to increase the proportion of learners leaving with at least one level 7 qualification.

## 2.12 Increasing post-school participation

In North Ayrshire in 2024-25, the percentage of all school leavers in a positive destination is 95.7% which is very slightly above last year's figure, continues to be above the virtual comparator, and is in line with the national level. When filtered to the most deprived 20% of young people, NAC performance has tracked above the VC and national figures for the last 5 years. This is also one of our Council Plan Performance Indicators, and we see the integration of the Employability Service into the Education Directorate as a real opportunity to maintain and build on this strong performance.



## 2.13 IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS 2024-25

Across the Education Service and the 9 Secondary schools, a range of universal and targeted approaches were put in place to support raising attainment for young people in North Ayrshire. The focus on high quality pedagogical approaches leading to improved attainment, as well as the use of data for improvement, were strategic priorities across all schools.

## 2.14 IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS 2025-26

For those school pupils leaving in June 2026, Secondary schools and the Education Service have focused on a range of activities and approaches. There has been an increased focus this academic session on the use of data for improving outcomes for all learners, the use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to support learners' pathways and curriculum choices, quality improvement of Secondary Support Resources and an authority-wide launch of improving pupil attendance. The [Education Service Improvement Plan for 2025-26](#) outlines the activity undertaken across this academic session to support raising attainment in our Secondary schools.

## 2.15 IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS 2026-27

The Education Service 3-year Improvement Plan draft priorities have been created collaboratively with Head Teachers of all schools to ensure there is a strategic focus on improving attainment and achievement for all learners and ensuring that learners receive equitable support. For Secondary schools, there will be an increased focus on target-setting for breadth and depth and qualifications, the creation of more collaborative and consistent approaches to tracking and monitoring, improving pedagogical approaches and strengthening learner pathways and curriculum offers. Improved monitoring of attainment and achievement at school and authority levels will be a key feature in evaluating improvement priorities and will help to direct targeted resource where required.

### 3. Proposals

3.1 It is recommended that Cabinet notes:

- (a) Notes the content of the report, including the achievements of school leavers in qualifications in 2025; and
- (b) Notes the measures being taken to make further improvements to attainment and achievement levels across NAC Secondary schools.

### 4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

#### **Financial**

4.1 None.

#### **Human Resources**

4.2 None.

#### **Legal**

4.3 None.

#### **Equality/Socio-economic**

4.4 None.

#### **Climate Change and Carbon**

4.5 None.

#### **Key Priorities**

4.6 Council priorities:

The focus of the Education Service is to align with the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic aim to 'transition to a wellbeing economy, delivering prosperity, wellbeing and resilience for local people' and more specifically 'improving educational attainment and achievement and closing the attainment gap' activities.

### **Community Wealth Building**

4.7 None.

### **Islands Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA)**

4.8 None.

### **United Nations Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

4.9 The focus on improving attainment outcomes for all young people demonstrates our commitment to Children's Rights and our continued work to ensure children's rights are being met.

### **Consumer Duty**

4.10 None.

## **5. Consultation**

5.1 The Education Quality Improvement Team has worked closely with Head Teachers to analyse, interpret and agree next steps towards further improvements in attainment and achievement. That work has formed the basis of this paper.

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Chief Education Officer, Head of Service (Education)

For further information please contact **Kathleen McCormick, Executive Manager (Education)**, on **01294 324418**.

### **Background Papers**

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## **GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT**

### **Virtual Comparator:**

Virtual comparator (VC) data is constructed from the performance of individual pupils with similar characteristics from schools in other local authorities. For every pupil in a North Ayrshire school, 10 similar pupils are identified from across all schools in other local authorities to be part of the virtual comparator's data. This allows a comparison based on some key pupil characteristics (gender, deprivation (SIMD decile), additional support needs and stage of leaving) that are linked to educational outcomes.

### **Average Total Tariff Score:**

Each qualification carries a number of tariff points, depending on the level and complexity of award. The system counts the best tariff score the candidate achieves in each qualification (the points are not counted for the same subject twice, so for example, if a candidate achieves National 5 English one year and goes on to achieve Higher English in a subsequent year, only the points for the Higher are counted). The average total tariff score is arrived at by adding the tariff scores of all school leavers and dividing by the number of leavers that year.

### **SIMD decile:**

Each datazone (made up of a broadly equal number of households, by postcode) across Scotland has been allocated a rank position through the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The ranks are determined by a range of factors including income, employment, health, education, housing, access to services etc. SIMD is the most commonly used proxy for deprivation across Scotland. The datazones are divided into ten groups by rank. These ten groups are called SIMD deciles. Decile 1 is the most deprived and decile 10 is the least deprived.

### **SCQF levels:**

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is the national framework for categorising all qualifications. The SCQF ranges from Level 1 to Level 12 based on the level of difficulty and complexity of the learning. Levels 1-3 are the most basic levels. Levels 4 and 5 are the equivalent of National 4 and National 5 qualifications. Level 6 is the equivalent to Higher and Level 7 is the equivalent to Advanced Higher. The remaining levels are for further and higher education qualifications, with Level 12 being doctorate level.