SPTC is pleased to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee in response to its Call for Evidence regarding the Government’s 2015-16 draft budget.

We are delighted that the Committee is taking forward its investigation into the funding of education, and in this case, schools. We believe the funding of schools to be thoroughly deserving of scrutiny: at the same time as we are experiencing extraordinary change in our education system, Scotland is also leading the way in terms of its curriculum and its drive towards greater community engagement. Part of that drive must be supported by greater understanding of how public services are funded and delivered, and it is only by shining the spotlight on these matters that we will make strides forward.

1. **Background**

SPTC is a long-standing parent-led membership organisation and charity providing help, advice and support to parents up and down the country. Our focus is on making parental engagement with education as good as it can be, by supporting parents and working with local authorities, schools and other stakeholders to build and share good practice.

We have a network of more than 8000 individual parents and our membership comprises almost 2000 Parent Councils and PTAs in state schools, representing tens of thousands of parents and carers. We have been working with BEMIS over the last 18 months to design and pilot the Gathered Together project, which aims to encourage greater involvement of parents from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in their child’s school community.

Given SPTC’s commitment to partnership working, we have productive relationships with a large number of local authorities, with which we work to provide support to parents and member parent groups. SPTC tries to represent a parental perspective in its communication with Parliament, Government and other stakeholders.
SPTC was part of Audit Scotland’s reference group in relation to its recent report on School Education in Scotland and we know the Committee is well aware of the findings presented in that report. We will therefore not rehearse Audit Scotland’s findings in this submission.

2. **Overview**

SPTC’s perspective in all matters relating to information for parents is that:

a) public information is just that, meaning parents have a right to access information which is available in the public domain.

b) there should be no filtering or selection. Parents should be respected as responsible partners in their child’s education.

c) information must be made understandable to the lay person, explained in plain English and in a way which helps parents make the connections to their lived experience.

Our first reflection on the document is therefore that while the budget is before the people of Scotland for consultation, very few lay people will be in a position to understand much of it. This is not simply a matter of this Government’s budget – it is the reality for a great deal of information which historically has come from Government and other public bodies. It also sets the tone for much of the information which comes from local government.

In short, from our perspective the accessibility of information across the board is a significant barrier to involvement of parents in matters relating to education. It is likely that at a national level, there are limited numbers of parents who are likely to have the time or inclination to delve deep. However, at a local authority or school level, parents are often interested to know what is happening in their area and how this compares with other councils: this can be evidenced by the FOI requests made to local authorities in order to gain information about spending on aspects of the service.

We feel it is important to highlight, however, that parental involvement (eg on a parent council or in a consultative group at local authority level) should not be confused with parental engagement. Parental involvement is concerned with governance, systems and processes and is largely governed by the Parental Involvement legislation. Parental engagement on the other hand is all about the way in which parents (individually or in a group) participate in the learning of their child(ren), often in partnership with schools and other educators.

3. **Committee Questions**

In responding to the Committee’s Call for Evidence, we have restricted ourselves to those areas which refer to our constituency, ie parents and, on their behalf, children.
Question 1
Given recent trends in local authorities’ spending on schools, what are likely to be the main pressures on education budgets in financial year 2015-16? Will there be any impacts on pupils and families; attainment; teacher numbers; the length and scheduling of the school week; teachers’ terms and conditions; developing and strengthening links between schools, colleges and employers; etc?

The Audit Commission’s report clearly highlighted the drop in spending on education services by local authorities, and how this is being achieved ie primarily through reducing staff numbers. These reductions have been made at both school and centre: most significantly we have seen a significant reduction in the number of Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs), who work with schools to develop their practice and to help improvement. This is perhaps most significant post-inspection, where QIOs have worked closely with schools to address identified development needs or indeed weaknesses. Without this resource at head office, this is a significant concern in terms of the ability of schools to deliver the improvements identified by HMIE.

Parental Involvement Officers, a role which came to the fore at the time of implementation of the Parental Involvement Act, have also been significantly impacted in recent years, with many officers now fulfilling a large number of roles (eg home education, consultations, complaints, early years), thus significantly diminishing their capacity to support parents and their involvement in schools. As a membership organisation for parent groups, SPTC has been able to fill this gap in a small way but our tiny team is no substitute for a locally based officer who has time to support parent groups on a sustained basis. The detrimental impact of this on parental involvement across the country is, we believe, significant.

Local authorities have used many means to reduce spending, including: re-organisation of the school week to maximise teacher contact time; adoption of a Faculty model in schools to reduce the number of department heads; reduction in business managers; utilisation of senior managers and non-specialist teachers to cover classes instead of paying for supply teachers (which is in itself difficult to find); re-organisation of council structures and departments to reduce staff numbers.

Many of these strategies are entirely legitimate within the context of diminishing resources, however we have long been concerned that there had been a salami-slicing approach to services rather than – as we believe is required – an in-depth and strategic review and redesign of services, conducted in a transparent and consultative way.

We believe Devolved School Management – which on the face of it gives control of school budgets to individual head teachers – has largely been a cosmetic exercise which, when staff and establishment costs are factored in, actually leaves school leaders with very little flexibility and control of their school
budget. In some cases, we know head teachers have been told they have a budget but with specified claw-back by the local authority (ie a negative budget)!

The Wood Commission’s report has been widely welcomed and in quick time we have seen action towards adopting its recommendations: it is however early days and challenging to quantify exactly what the impact and resources needed will be.

In relation to policy objectives, SPTC has made clear its concerns regarding the Named Person element of the CYP Act: putting to one side our concerns about the way in which the policy will impact on families, we believe the resource implications of implementing the policy have been underestimated and will in fact prove to be a significant drain on local authority/school resources. For example, we believe Police Scotland is already putting in place a policy which will mean that the Named Person will automatically be informed of any police engagement with that child.

Finally, the implementation of the new SQA qualifications and CfE remains as a priority throughout the education system: as an organisation we have been very supportive of CfE but concerned about many aspects of its implementation, including the extremely variable quality of communication with parents. Notwithstanding that, there will be a further two years before the new qualifications are fully embedded in our schools, with significant implications for both young people and their teachers. We have seen in the last session the stresses and strains of implementing the Nationals: it is our sincere hope that the lessons are learned from that experience and the next two years are managed much more effectively at school, local authority and national level.

**Question 2**

**How should schools, local authorities and the Scottish Government be preparing to deal with these spending pressures?**

SPTC has been increasingly concerned that in the process (outlined above) within local authorities, there has loss of focus on education and schools, as education becomes part of departments which encompass Children, Families, Leisure, Justice and a range of other services. We are concerned that this loss of focus is diminishing and diluting commitment to parental involvement at an authority level, which in turn impacts on school approaches. This to us undermines Government policy regarding parental involvement.

We believe it is time to have a fundamental review of how education is provided to Scottish children: necessity is the mother of invention and as a country Scotland can be very inventive! Scotland should be determined to step up for its children and families, build on the principles of CfE and commit to a more responsive, transparent and values based school system, rooted in and engaged with the communities in which schools are located.
Just one proposal we are aware of, which would make a fundamental difference to our schools, children and school funding is the principle of setting the school starting age as 5 years: this move, it is argued, would reduce costs and improve outcomes for children at a stroke. High quality pre-school care costs less than school education and it has been argued that, as well as saving money, it would provide children who otherwise enter school aged 4 with a better start to their education, with long term benefits.

A significant element of the education service review should, we believe, be a refresh of the principles and policies around parental engagement and involvement which supports both children and families, recognising that the welfare and wellbeing of children cannot be addressed outwith the context of their family and community, and that the needs and rights of parents and children are intrinsically connected.

**Question 3**

*Will the allocation to be provided via the 2015-16 Draft Budget be sufficient to enable local authorities to provide a quality education; meet all their statutory obligations in relation to schools; and deliver the Scottish Government’s national educational priorities?*

We see opportunities for improvement through redesign and change, as outlined above.

On a practical level, SPTC recently wrote to the Cabinet Secretary in relation to issues around teacher shortages. The challenges being faced every day in Scottish schools – lack of supply teachers, over-commitment of senior management, unfilled teacher and head teacher posts – is possibly the worst kept secret in Scottish education and yet it affects the education of probably thousands of children and young people. While very few parents are aware of the situation, everyone involved in education at national and governmental level knows the reality. This is another instance of parents being kept in the dark in a deeply paternalistic and patronising way.

After parental engagement, quality of teaching (and therefore teachers) impacts most positively on outcomes for young people: we cannot achieve good outcomes when our teaching population is inadequate or under these kinds of pressure.

We are extremely pleased to note that the budget also highlights a commitment to funding advocacy and volunteer support for looked after children, a proposal SPTC made in 2011, in its evidence to the enquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children. We believe every child needs someone who is just mad about them: looked after children are no exception.
Question 5
How do the Scottish Government and local authorities ensure that funding for schools is spent in a way that best delivers value for money?

The Audit Scotland report made a number of recommendations in relation to best practice.

However, by definition the Audit Scotland report measures only what is measurable. We think there is a need to also consider what is more difficult to measure, such as creativity, values, health and the impact of active parental engagement. This is a challenge for schools, local authorities and Education Scotland to consider, and we particularly reference Education Scotland’s planned refresh of How Good is Our School.

Question 6
How are pupils, parents, teachers, and communities able to contribute to discussions on-
- the allocations that should be set out in the draft budget;
- how these allocations should be spent on schools?

For parents the most meaningful engagement is at school level, but the reality is that budget process at local authority and school level are often inaccessible or opaque. The Parental Involvement legislation entitles parents to be engaged, but the quality of communication from schools is key in making this a valid process.

We believe any redesign of school education should specifically reflect the drive to involve communities more in decision making which affects them.

Question 7
How will the draft budget advance the preventative spending agenda in relation to school spending?

As indicated earlier, high quality teaching and meaningful parental engagement are key to positive outcomes.

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24 October 2014