The Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS) is an independent education charity representing over 70 member schools in Scotland which educate around 32,000 children of mixed abilities from diverse backgrounds. SCIS promotes choice, diversity and excellence in Scottish education. SCIS welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on proposed amendments to the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015.

In response to the Scottish Government's proposal to lodge an amendment to the Education (Scotland) Bill to introduce the National Improvement Framework, issues of teaching and learning remain the autonomous responsibilities of independent schools. Scottish Government guidance on the registration of independent schools points out that registration requires provision of a copy of the school’s “curriculum, statement of aims, prospectus, admission policy” etc. Schools are required to provide Ministers with a clear picture of the type of school a proprietor would like to operate, the client group and the type of education which the users can expect to receive.

Education Scotland inspects independent schools on the basis of their own “policy for examinations and accreditation that is particular to the school”. As such there is no curriculum, set of qualifications, testing and assessment model binding on autonomous independent schools. Moreover, the National Improvement Framework was clearly not designed with independent schools in mind. Some independent schools currently participate in the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy, for instance, but by no means all, particularly not those offering non-SQA exams or preparatory schools.

SCIS members would be interested to hear how schools might engage with the proposed Framework where appropriate. SCIS believes that member schools provide a high calibre of education for all pupils, as can be seen in the fact that in 2015 57% of pupils received an A grade in “old” Highers and 60% received an A grade in “new” Highers. Additionally, many pupils go on to positive leaver destinations, for example, in 2014 89% of pupils attending SCIS schools went on to higher education.

3 For more details of our recent exam results see http://www.scis.org.uk/facts-and-statistics/exam-results/
Independent schools are able to focus on the attainment of individual pupils through their autonomy and their freedom to make decisions about the running of individual schools. This is not to say that some schools have not chosen to embrace the principles of Scottish Government policies, for example, Curriculum for Excellence. However, it is important to restate that independent schools are not bound by these policies and are free from the statutory duties described in the Draft National Improvement Framework as independent schools exercise autonomy over their governance, curriculum and examinations. Of particular significance is that many independent schools are registered as charities, and as part of the charity test undertaken by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) the specific point is made that “If an organisation’s governing document says that government Ministers can control what the organisation does or tell it what to do, then usually that organisation cannot be a charity, even if it has charitable purposes and provides public benefit.”^4 While interested to follow best practice in attainment and assessment, independent members would understandably be reluctant to pursue any policies which would threaten their status as charities, particularly after the hard work they have undertaken to pass this rigorous test.

SCIS schools’ ability to deliver high quality and innovative education is possible in part due to their independence and the ability to make decisions in the best interests of staff, pupils and parents. SCIS schools have actively made a choice to have control over certain decisions, allowing them to support each individual pupil in their learning journey to improve, contribute and achieve as much as possible.

The Draft National Improvement Framework makes little reference to the complex needs of pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN). SCIS schools support pupils with ASN as independent special schools, as Grant Aided Special Schools, and as mainstream schools with well-developed support for learning departments. SCIS believes that this high quality and individualised education is one of the reasons parents choose independent education. SCIS would have large reservations about any changes which could damage independent schools’ ability to compete in a highly competitive global market, particularly as 30% of all boarders at SCIS schools are international pupils.

Moreover, SCIS believes that the statutory duty to provide an Annual School Improvement Plan should not be mandatory for independent schools, with reporting duties based on priorities set by the Scottish Government. It is the role of the Governing Body and Trustees of an independent schools, alongside the Senior Management Team, to set the priorities of the school, and their ability to do so should not be restricted. Education Scotland will always be able to quality-assure the individual school plans and procedures put forward by independent schools.


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SCIS notes that two of the six “Drivers of improvement” in the Draft National Improvement Framework are “School leadership” and “Teacher professionalism”. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and meeting the high expectations of staff in terms of their careers are supported at all levels throughout SCIS schools both through their own training and a comprehensive and wide ranging CPD programme offered by SCIS and other schools’ and heads’ associations. In reference to SCIS’ recent response to the consultation on the proposed introduction of a ‘Standard for Headship’, it should be stressed that school leadership is strongly promoted and supported within SCIS schools through many varied learning opportunities.

SCIS schools believe strongly that high-calibre training opportunities are available to independent schools and that they should have the freedom to choose which of these opportunities they and their staff wish to undertake, just as Governing Boards should have the autonomy and freedom to select the best possible candidate for the position of Head, based on the individual school's needs, direction and priorities. This element of choice is extremely important to independent schools and to the families that select and support them.

SCIS is concerned that the proposals in the Draft National Improvement Framework have the potential to lead to the publication of league tables. SCIS publishes annual exam results for member schools who participate in SQA exams. However, SCIS lists these exam results in alphabetical order of schools and does not publish league tables based on exam results. Any introduction of league tables based on the proposed exams would be extremely damaging to all schools (independent and local authority).

SCIS notes the reference in the Draft National Improvement Framework of the Insight benchmarking tool. SCIS would like to stress that at present independent schools do not have access to Insight – despite their enthusiasm to be benchmarked alongside their colleagues in local authority schools. Therefore any proposal to share data in this way or in a similar way would be unfamiliar to independent schools and is a further reason why the proposed duties should not be mandatory on these schools.

SCIS believes that some independent schools may choose to use some of the principles and measures proposed in the Draft National Improvement Framework. However, it is paramount that this be a genuine choice and their autonomy and

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5 For more details of SCIS’ CPD programme see [http://www.scis.org.uk/cpd/forthcoming-courses](http://www.scis.org.uk/cpd/forthcoming-courses)

6 SCIS’ response to the proposed Government amendments to the Education (Scotland) Bill relating to the Standard for Headship can be seen here [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EducationandCultureCommittee/Education%20(Scotland)%20Bill/SHSCIS.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EducationandCultureCommittee/Education%20(Scotland)%20Bill/SHSCIS.pdf)
ability to make decisions in the best interests of their school and their pupils should not be lost.