13 March 2015

Dear Terry,

**Educational attainment gap – role of the third and private sectors: Response from Children in Scotland**

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to offer our comments to the Committee’s call for evidence. We are the umbrella body for the children’s sector, including education, health, social care, early years and childcare. We have over 430 members and our staff are delivering a wide range of projects and programmes in schools and other settings, with an array of public, private and third sector partners.

In Scotland today, too many children from deprived households and communities finish their formal education with significantly lower levels of attainment than their peers from more affluent areas. Similarly, if they are living in less well-off households and where families are headed up by either one or both parents who have few, if any, formal qualifications. Our universal, comprehensive education is one of the great strengths of Scottish society. Nevertheless, young people in school communities based in our most disadvantaged areas will tend to emerge from their school with fewer qualifications and youth awards than their more affluent peers. Equally disturbing, there is an attainment gap between the more and less affluent children and young people within the majority of all our schools—regardless of their geographical location.

In this context, we strongly support the current political priority to raise school attainment and work towards eliminating the attainment gap. Of course, this is not something that can be addressed in isolation of the wider social justice agenda and schools cannot be regarded as the sole solution. For example, we would highlight the high priority being given to improving outcomes and support in the early years and the important role played by third and private sector providers in minimising the attainment gap before children enter school, via community-based and pre-school services. Long-term, sustainable anti-poverty and health improvement strategies must also be implemented and sustained to improve every aspect of the lives of children and young people unfairly impacted by poverty, including as a consequence of welfare reforms.

Nevertheless, the shocking gap in attainment between richer and poorer children requires a far more ruthless focus on the specific requirements within learning settings of a strategic approach to improving educational attainment. An approach which is child-centred; builds on the strong principles and ethos of curriculum for excellence and which is directly rooted in evidence of how children learn and can apply their learning to secure improved achievement and attainment.

There is no doubt that there is excellent work underway within schools among a range of partners, including the third and private sectors to build the capacity of
children, young people, parents and the wider community. Much of this work focuses on a wider set of goals, which aim to tackle the causes of inequality and mitigate the impact of poverty. This is important work and it should continue. Nevertheless, if the third and private sectors are to make a significant contribution to eliminating the attainment gap, they must ensure their projects are designed for this purpose. Local authorities and learning settings must also commit to integrating fully their work into the wider school community (from early years through to the senior phase). Working in partnership and alongside staff in learning settings, the third and private sectors contribution to the continuum of learning, health and wellbeing and skills development for each individual child from 3-18 years should be welcomed and the effectiveness of their work assessed and evaluated in the same context as all those working in learning settings.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation provides the most recent succinct and authoritative evidence base for the approaches which are effective in improving educational attainment (http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education). We have used its framework to propose the following plan for securing a more effective contribution for the third and private sectors.

Our plan is based on 5 improvement proposals:

1. Curriculum for Excellence is updated to underline that it is Scotland’s approach to learning for all – from birth throughout adulthood. If we are to have an unrelenting focus on improving educational attainment we need to recognise formally within CfE that learning begins from birth and that the pre-formal learning experiences of a child before 3, together with the love, care and support provided by their parents, carers and professionals, provide the crucial pre-conditions for future effective learning.

   Formally extending CfE to start from birth rather than 3 years old, will also underline the value placed on the critical early years. It will recognise the role of families, professionals, particularly from health, and the third and private sectors which are the principal service providers for children and their families in the early years.

2. We welcome the proposal within the Scottish Attainment Challenge to develop a bespoke improvement plan tackling attainment inequality for a school or cluster of schools. However, we believe this needs to be set within a wider attainment strategy of a local authority and community planning area and, in particular, in the context of the school community based around primary schools and their partner secondary schools, special schools and early years settings. Making sure that the learning development of each child is planned from the early years through to transition in secondary, where improvement is sustained, will be critical to long-term achievement of goals.

   It is also essential if the contribution of the third and private sectors is to be harnessed and prioritised on greatest need and where it can work in effective partnership with the school and other learning staff. Equally, we must ensure that the work of schools, supported by the Scottish Government is also embedded within the local authority/community planning partnership area. This is critical if we are to maximise the resources available for tackling inequality and its causes and sustain improvement once SG funding comes to an end.
3. Equally, only an area-wide strategy can ensure that our most vulnerable children – those with additional support needs, including looked after at home and those who may need to move in and out of mainstream school or require specialist support – receive the resources they require, including support from the third sector or specialists such as educational psychologists.

4. We welcome the progress made by the literacy and numeracy hubs, which appear to have been effective in implementing evidence-based approaches within the classroom and the emphasis on parental engagement, often with the support of third sector partners. An area which we believe requires further attention and action is that effective engagement with families in the early years must address the literacy and numeracy needs of many parents. If parents are not sufficiently literate and numerate and if they cannot apply these skills with their children, such as in board games or talking about stories the children are reading for homework, then they cannot support effectively their children. It is a sensitive area but both schools and the third sector have experience which can be used. JRF’s analysis of the evidence suggests this is critical, given the importance of family engagement in a child’s attainment.

With this additional emphasis and unless there is evidence to suggest otherwise, we believe these hubs should be rolled out across the country and become the established improvement approach to improving literacy and numeracy. We are concerned with any diversion and potential time lost in children’s lives in effectively reinventing wheels. We hope the Attainment Scotland Fund will build on this existing good practice within literacy and numeracy.

5. We welcome the announcement that the Attainment Scotland Fund will also enable schools to develop out of school activities. This is a critical feature of the development of our children’s skills and our primary schools are seedbeds for the development of the critical skills of confidence, resilience, leadership and team work required for life and work in adulthood. Skills development is underpinned by the welcome and innovative approach we have in Scotland in our commitment to health and wellbeing. Out of school activities are critical but only if they are built on and complementary to, experiences in school and built on throughout their journey through primary and secondary. Too many out of school activities provide great experiences for children, such as a week’s outward bound course but if these are isolated and fail to build on a child or young person’s leadership skills development, then they are a wasted opportunity.

An example is where Children in Scotland provided funding from STV Hunter to Irvine Royal Academy to enable 22 S3 young people to go to Arran for 5 days on a leadership development course. The school, CiS and STV Hunter were clear that we would not fund a one-off experience for the young people. A condition of funding was that the school had to demonstrate its commitment to building and sustaining these young people’s skills. The young people committed to the need to follow-up on their week’s course and, to date and six months on from their course, they have completed a number of commitments to the school. This has included visiting their partner primary schools’ P7 parents’ nights to promote the school. In one school, they succeeded in 13/17 of the catchment children signing up to Irvine. Parent from this primary school had not sent children to Irvine for several years.
The development and embedding of skills is essential for a child’s future success in secondary school and, we would argue, is essential if the objectives in Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce, are to be achieved. Enabling the third and private sectors, including funders, to understand and contribute fully to the area’s attainment strategy, including the development of skills as part of a child’s wider health and wellbeing needs, will enable them to be even more effective as a partner in the work of the schools.

We hope this provides helpful thinking for the Committee’s future recommendations to the Scottish Government.

Annex A provides more detail on the wider approaches we believe are required on tackling inequality and examples of Children in Scotland’s work in this area.
ANNEX A

Children in Scotland welcomes the recent announcement of the new Scottish Attainment Challenge. The Attainment Scotland Fund of £100 million spread over four years will initially be targeted towards those schools in local authority areas where there is a large concentration of households in deprived areas. We hope that those on the frontline of education will also welcome this announcement, as the focus of some of the funding will be towards additional teachers to support schools and building or developing existing collaborative approaches with parents and community partners.

We are, however, very concerned by the regular reports of cuts to education funding by some local authorities and the on-going issue of certain local authority areas across Scotland finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain high quality teachers with consequent impact on children and young peoples’ education. We would urge politicians from all parties at national and local level to protect, and if possible, increase investment in our children and young people.

There is certainly scope to improve current arrangements to prepare children and young people for work. Whilst the third and private sectors already have a role in this however, we also believe there must be a balance between helping children and young people to think about the skills and attitudes needed to participate in the world of work and for them to enjoy their childhood and develop skills and knowledge in a wide range of areas. For example, the Scottish Government’s seven-year plan for youth employment refers to providing children at nursery and primary levels with a clear picture of employment choices that could be open to them and to start equipping them with the right skills needed for work. We question if it is appropriate and realistic to engage such young children in these complex issues.

Instead, we believe that the focus for young children should remain delivering the Curriculum for Excellence, which is designed to provide a wide range of personal experiences and development. We would hope too that full implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) will help children and young people to achieve their potential by supporting them in any wider issues that may be affecting their lives.

We also welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to provide 30,000 new Modern Apprenticeships (MA) from 2020. While the intentions are laudable, we would highlight the current minimum wage for Modern Apprenticeships, which stands at £2.73 for a young person under 19 in their first year of apprenticeship. This very low level of pay, around a third of the living wage, £7.65, will be almost impossible for many young people but particularly those who have to relocate for the opportunity of a MA, who cannot depend on parents or carers for support and may have to live independently.

We recognise the positive impact that MAs can provide for young people while they are earning and learning. However, a cultural shift is indeed required in our attitude towards achievement and success, i.e. going beyond those who succeed academically and those who opt for other pathways, such as a vocational education. Pupils who choose this vocational pathway should be encouraged and celebrated for their achievements at the same standard we regard those attending university or further education. The third sector is already playing an important part in this area, however greater focus, earlier, on transitions for all pupils, especially looked after young people and those with complex additional support needs are areas the third sector has demonstrated successes and further improved outcomes could be
achieved with a strategic collaborative approach at both national and local community levels.

However, what we do lack in Scotland is sufficient, good quality work placements and work experience to offer young people a positive flavour of work environments. We know that this has been recognised but we remain concerned at the lack of progress for young people with additional support needs; those with disabilities; young carers; young people in or leaving the care system; and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. At local levels support with the process, protocols and regulation that can often make these placements more complicated, would also be beneficial.

Children in Scotland are delivering a nationwide LifeSkills programme, which has been developed by Barclays. LifeSkills is an education programme designed to give young people in the UK access to the skills they need to make the transition into work. As the Scottish charity provider for Barclays, Children in Scotland are delivering the programme to schools with a high Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement across secondary schools in Scotland.

The programme offers the key skills that many young people appear to lack for the world of work, such as people skills, work skills and money skills. It is not dissimilar to wider programmes provided by Skills Development Scotland. It is both alarming and depressing for us to see the lack of confidence and aspirations that so many children and young people have, despite the best efforts of teaching staff. At the same time, many of the young people we meet highlight the lack of opportunity in both deprived urban areas and more rural areas to access even basic or temporary employment. This supports our view that there has to be a cultural shift in the roles of public and private sector to offer genuine opportunities. Other third and private sector organisations provide other programmes focussed on successful transition into the work environment and a more cohesive, strategic approach across these programmes could strengthen outcomes at both national and local levels.

Finally, while we welcome the focus on raising attainment for our children and young people, it is vital that the role of parents and carers is also taken into account in supporting their children to become confident, aspirational and ambitious. While successful delivery of the National Parenting Strategy will go some way to achieving this, we believe that a powerful focus on supporting parents and carers in our most deprived communities is necessary if we are to break inter-generational cycles of unemployment and lack of hope and aspirations, coupled with the deeply harmful effects of poverty. The innovative and flexible approach of the third sector is well placed to support and facilitate the creative community driven approaches this requires. This is a broader task than improving educational outcomes for our children but one where the links with Scotland's Economic Strategy and the range of social justice approaches must be made and reinforced.

Jackie Brock,
Chief Executive,
Children in Scotland
Children in Scotland is Scotland’s national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 470 members, including 90% of Scottish Local Authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children’s agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children’s services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland) and the National Voluntary Children’s Forum. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve:ASL, Scotland’s largest independent education mediation service.