The Fostering Network is the UK’s leading charity for all those involved in fostering committed to raising the standards of care for children and young people who are in foster care and for those leaving foster care. The Fostering Network is a membership organisation and the membership in Scotland includes more than 4,000 fostering households, all local authorities and all Registered Fostering Providers.

The Fostering Network is pleased to have the opportunity to comment in response to the Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry into how parents and schools can best work together to raise all pupils’ attainment, particularly those whose attainment is lowest. Our evidence relates to the crucial role that foster carers have in supporting children and young people to achieve the very best possible outcomes.

We believe that foster carers should be recognised as ‘first educators’ of the child or young person in their care. We need to ensure foster carers are trained, supported and empowered to proactively support children to achieve their potential.

We know that many foster carers along with many birth parents never achieved in education and schools can be intimidating places. Many parents and carers may feel inadequate to help children in new topics and areas of learning. Some will find computers challenging. If we are going to help the lowest achievers to do better, we believe teachers and whole schools need to invite parents whose children are in foster care, along with foster carers to get the chance to go over lessons and materials first and help the parent/carer to gain more confidence so that they can in turn help their child to learn.

We are currently running 2 key programmes which may be of significant interest for the Education and Culture Committee:

1 - London Fostering Achievement:

Evidence suggests that schools can find it ‘hard to reach’ some foster carers. Foster carer engagement with schools, whilst challenging, can be key to improving outcomes for children in care.

The Fostering Network and Cardiff Metropolitan University conducted a study of foster carers’ experiences and opinions with regard to children’s educational achievement. Respondents clearly identified systemic barriers, including low aspiration for the children - something they struggle to counter, a problematic relationship with other professionals

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2 Cardiff Metropolitan University. 2012 Fostering Higher Education Success in Wales, a Report on Foster Carers’ Views The Fostering Network Wales. Cardiff.
involved in their care, and lack of knowledge or experience on their part in how to support children, particularly through to higher education.

These findings were supported by surveys run by The Fostering Network in March 2014\(^3\) in London, where foster carers highlighted a need for greater information and support. For example, 40% of respondents felt teachers did not understand the foster carer role. Whilst 48% had received no educational training, 82% of those that had received educational training felt it helped them to support fostered children’s achievement.

London Fostering Achievement is a programme which was set up in response to these findings in July 2014, led by The Fostering Network and funded through the Mayor’s London Schools Excellence Fund. There are early indications that multi-agency training, peer support and direct work with schools can help to address some of the barriers foster carers face and promote engagement in education.

To date, the programme has:

- **Worked with 32 local authorities to set up half-day education training sessions** to bring together foster carers with social workers, educational professionals and other members of the team around the child. Each training session is co-delivered by a foster carer and covers roles and responsibilities, how to maximise the impact of a personal education plan and practical ways for foster carers to support learning.

- **Recruited 10 foster carers to be Education Champions** in five pilot areas, providing informal one to one peer support to other foster carers to boost their knowledge and confidence around education. The Education Champions are also working with fostering services and Virtual Schools to help shape and advise on local provision. For example, two Champions have worked with their school improvement service to offer foster carers taster courses in phonics and maths.

- **Started working directly with 27 schools through Achievement for All**, The Fostering Network’s delivery partner on the programme. Achievement for All is an educational charity with a significant track record of increasing achievement across their established programme. For London Fostering Achievement, they have adapted their evidence-based framework to tailor it to meet the needs of children looked after. Achievement for All promote a whole school approach, boost child and carer engagement through structured conversations and encourage schools to undertake a STEEP analysis to identify barriers to education and potential solutions for this group.

The early indications from participant feedback suggests that London Fostering Achievement is having a positive impact. The programme is being externally evaluated by the Rees Centre at Oxford University and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University. The final report will be issued towards the end of 2015.

We welcome the opportunity to share the learning of this programme with the Education and Culture Committee and to consider the possibility of piloting a similar initiative in Scotland.

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\(^3\) Online survey March 2014, 65 respondents, representing highly engaged foster carers
2 - Fostering Achievement (FA) in Northern Ireland

FA is a project of the Fostering Network in Northern Ireland and is funded by the Health and Social Care Board. The FA scheme provides direct educational provision to children and young people in foster care and is contracted to provide directly to at least 1300 children in foster care each year. In addition to direct educational provision, the scheme delivers a summer programme of activities, achievement awards events in each of the five HSCT areas, delivers the Letterbox Club and associated activities provides training workshops (2-4 per trust area each year) as well as delivering a range of other events which encourage educational engagement, including advocacy work to support foster carers on issues of educational importance and relevance, this can include accompanying carers to school and providing workshops for carers on educational matters.

A key component of the programme is the range of educational material, activities and services offered to children in foster care, including:

- Computers and software for children within their foster home
- Tuition at home
- Sports equipment and funding for classes/clubs
- Music equipment and lessons
- Arts, drama and dance equipment and lessons
- Educational materials – little buddy and study buddy packs of learning games.
- EAL packs – resources to support learning for children with English as a second language
- Driving lessons – initially 10 lessons and theory test, once theory test passed we fund 20 more lessons and the driving test.
- Outdoor activities – part funding for school trips, weekly activity or residential teen adventure summer scheme
- Summer schemes funding
- Gym membership
- Horse-riding lessons
- Family passes – W5, Belfast Zoo, National Trust, Streamvale Farm

- Year 11 GCSE study plan - currently piloting a GCSE study plan which includes assessment, study skills and planning and tutoring for some young people.
- Training workshops for foster carers on ‘understanding the curriculum’, anti-bullying, supporting young people to apply to University, etc.
- Primary Summer Scheme- age 8-11, one week duration. Focus on fun learning and socialising
- Teen Adventure- age 13-17- three night activity based residential
- University of Ulster Residential- age 14-17, focus on giving young people a taste of University Life
- Achievement Awards-
- We run these in the 5 Trust areas, once per year. A celebration event about what the young people have accomplished.

Both of the above mentioned  Fostering Achievement programmes are having a significant impact on educational outcomes for children and young people in foster care, with foster carers commenting on their increased confidence in supporting children and young people with the curriculum.

We would welcome the opportunity to share the findings more fully with the Education & Culture Committee and to consider the possibilities of how such a programme may be piloted within a Scottish context.

Sara Lurie
Director for Scotland, the Fostering Network
23 March 2015