Introduction

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 450 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.

Children in Scotland manage Enquire (Scotland’s advice service for additional support for learning) and Resolve (the largest ASL mediation provider in Scotland) and host NPFS, the National Parent Forum for Scotland. These, together with the participatory projects that we engage in around the country, give us direct contact with the children and young people we seek to serve and offers us an invaluable insight into the experience of Scotland’s children and young people.

Q1. Whether schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years and how parents could help their development.

The school’s role in explaining how children learn throughout school and encouraging parents to become involved in that process is an essential element of closing the attainment gap, yet there is as yet insufficient recognition among schools of the transformative role parents can play in supporting their child’s learning and thus narrowing the attainment gap.

Removing barriers that preclude a parent’s involvement in their child’s learning, supporting parent’s by imparting the knowledge and tools that they need to adequately support their child, and recognising the challenges that parents face (particularly parents from disadvantaged backgrounds) in helping to educate their child at home are all essential factors that must be considered.

Schools and local authorities need to continue to do as much as possible to communicate openly, effectively and positively with parents in order to encourage engagement and parental involvement. Communication, and predominantly a breakdown in it, is at the heart of the majority of enquiries to the Enquire helpline and cases dealt with by Resolve mediation service. Effective parental
involvement relies on there being good communication between stakeholders, improved mutual understanding of the roles of teachers and parents and how they best work together in the best interests of the child.

Recent successful examples can be found in Save the Children’s Family and Schools Together programme ad Children in Scotland’s Schools as Hubs programme supported by the STV Hunter Foundation. The former focuses on building a stronger relationship between parents and teachers, and coaching parents on how to work effectively with their children. Children in Scotland’s Schools Hubs Programme explores improving wider engagement with parents and the broader school community and illustrates 5 schools creative ways of engaging with parents and the wider community. This work is too early to be able to identify specific improvements in attainment as a direct result, however it does demonstrate increased parental involvement in the life of the school in a variety of different ways. It is however clear that this is not entirely the responsibility of the wider school and that increased inter-agency working is also important to support and facilitate this work.

However, it should be stressed that efforts to encourage information sharing between schools and parents should be the result of a clear and concerted strategy to involve parents and empower them with the information they need to support their child based on solid pedagogical evidence and research, and not approached in a piecemeal fashion.

Q2. Whether schools are always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child’s education (given parents’ work commitments, for example)

There are undoubtedly a great many schools throughout Scotland that make concerted efforts to introduce a level of flexibility that would allow parents to play a full and active part in the life of the school and their child’s education. Changing work patterns generally mean the working day varies considerably for all families. This is a challenge for all schools to provide a flexible approach to engagement with parents that meets the majority of parents needs however this could also be supported by improvements in family friendly working practices.

There is evidence to suggest that there is a certain level of inconsistency in approach as to how schools meet the challenge of offering flexibility to parents who might want to become more involved in their child’s learning, both logistically and pedagogically.

Improvements in flexibility could be achieved particularly by considering the needs of specific groups of parents who do not have flexibility at short notice to attend school, including parents on low incomes, parents of children with disabilities, engagement of carers of looked after children etc. As part of a recent survey of parents of children with disabilities we also heard that the use of technology e.g. email directly to the professionals involved is helpful in addressing a more flexible contact and engagement at a time that works for them.

Acceptance of the fact that some parents experiencing severe economic hardship can lead chaotic lives that do not readily lend themselves to becoming a full and active partner in their child’s education. Greater understanding of these
circumstances and more flexibility in terms of the scheduling and rescheduling of appointments at school may help to ameliorate this concern.

Parents who utilise Enquire (Scotland’s advice service for additional support for learning), often report an unwillingness on the part of school staff to engage with learning methods and pedagogy that might have been researched by the parent. Whilst there may be questions or concerns about the educational benefits of different approaches, there still needs to be an opportunity for parents views to be heard and schools need to be able to clearly demonstrate the value of the learning and teaching approach they are adopting.

This can form the basis of a breakdown in the relationship between the parent and the school, which in turn can lead to making the task of closing the attainment gap for some of the most vulnerable children and young people more challenging, something that can be evidenced by cases addressed through Resolve mediation services.

Greater flexibility is required therefore, not just in term of logistics but in taking into consideration the views of parents who want to do all they can to support their child.

This is important, as our experience shows that there is a clear indication that children perform better when parent and school can work effectively together and share a productive working relationship.

Q3. The extent to which schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils

The positive impact that parental involvement can have in closing the attainment gap is substantial, and the body of evidence that suggests that the home learning environment is the critical factor in raising attainment is both voluminous and persuasive.

However, it must be recognised that as far as home support for learning is concerned, the trajectory is set very early in life, and that patterns of cognitive development and engagement with the learning process are already measurable at two, making it critically important that this engagement with parents is a continuum and starts at the earliest stages, pre-school, through early years education and care and on into school years.

Examples noted above from the CiS Schools Hubs programme and the Save the Children Family and Schools Together Programme are good examples of where schools are offering particular support to the parents from the most disadvantaged communities.

The fact is that for many parents (and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds), school and the school environment can be associated with a number of negative connotations. It is common for parents to have children enrolled at the same school that they attended. Among younger parents in particular, it can also be the case that their children are taught by the same teaching staff that they themselves were taught by, which can often be the source of negative relationship between school and parent. It is important that this is overcome if schools are to engage positively with parents.
CPD for teachers to become better equipped at engaging parents, particularly parents who do not share their educational and social background, is important to establish an inclusive culture and ethos in our Schools and Children in Scotland is already working with Scottish Government and Education Scotland to support the ongoing professional development of school staff in engaging both with parents and children and young people themselves as well as raising awareness of the resources, tools ad publications that currently exist to support this.

However, one possible barrier to achieving this is the fact that many parent groups around schools are not as inclusive or as representative of the school community as they should be. Encouraging the involvement of parents from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds is beneficial and specific efforts should be made to encourage a diverse membership of parent council's and forums.

It is also essential to acknowledge that even with the best support, parental capacity is finite. For example, parents with learning disabilities, who report to our member organization Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities regular challenges in supporting their children particularly through written communications and formal engagement in many avenues of their life.

It is important to understand that there are no magic bullets and one size does not fit all. Each child's and family's situation is different so each school needs to understand what might work for each child and family, in their local communities, especially when they are likely to need support beyond what universal and mainstream resources can provide. We also need to be able to understand and assess risk of unequal outcomes more effectively — a child who has poor vocabulary development at two is at high risk of failing educationally, and a child whose family has not supported their early attachment and cognitive development well is likely to have poor vocabulary at two.

What is clear is that in the present austere environment that has seen a significant tightening of local authority budgets, the necessity of addressing these issues has become more pronounced, yet also more challenging.

Q5. Whether greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) has led to an improvement in pupil attainment

Whilst parental involvement in schools has undoubtedly improved, it is essential that we ensure that this involvement improves for all parents.

One helpful solution would be to consider what is required for effective measurement of the impact that parental involvement has on attainment, Children in Scotland would welcome work being done in this area.

Q6. Whether there are any new measures that could realistically be taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents’ forums, the voluntary sector, etc) to help parents raise their child’s attainment.

In recent years there have been a number legislative and public policy interventions that have sought to address problems of disadvantage and educational attainment that continue to persist in Scotland.
Measures to promote greater levels of integration between services, encouraging joint working and information sharing between professionals and introducing increased flexibility and freedom for those working in education to make decisions have played significant part in supporting parents and children from economically deprived households.

Investment in early years education and the provision of 600 hours of free nursery education may have a transformative effect on the life chances of Scotland’s most vulnerable children and young people and give parents a valuable opportunity to re-enter the world of work.

Significant though these measures are, however, they have not focused solely and specifically on closing the educational-attainment gap, and as such, there has been insufficient progress in meeting the challenges that this represents.

Children in Scotland welcome the Scottish Government’s statement of intent outlined in the most recent Programme for Government and elsewhere to now make closing the attainment gap a public policy priority.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge and the Education (Scotland) Bill provide an invaluable opportunity to make progress, but these measures must be inclusive of all children in Scotland living in poverty – not just those who live in areas of multiple deprivation.

Likewise, a renewed effort to provide adequate and efficient support to children with additional support needs is necessary. In a climate of decreasing budgets and tightening resources, it is essential that these children, who are often most at risk of low attainment, receive the help and support that they require to flourish and reach their true potential.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this response, an important consideration for closing the attainment gap in Scotland is making preschool provision available at a much earlier age for children from deprived backgrounds.

While the Scottish Government provides opportunity for Looked After Children to attend preschool from the age of two, those from the poorest households do not can only start from age three and are disadvantaged as a result.

That being so, Children in Scotland would recommend that the Scottish Government consider making preschool opportunities available from the age of two for children from the most disadvantaged households.
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 450 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 Scotland's Children’s Sector 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.