Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to give evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on 22 November as part of the Committee’s inquiry into educational attainment of looked after children.

I would like to reiterate to the Committee that the Scottish Government’s ambition for our looked after children is no different to what we aim for all children of Scotland – we want them to be all that they can be. We recognise that looked after children face additional barriers when accessing education and therefore require additional support from all those who are involved in their care.

This Government places a particular focus on the early years, as individual capacity to learn is significantly shaped by the first 2-3 years when the brain is still developing. We recognise, however, that it will take many years for our interventions to be reflected in better outcomes for looked after children. Providing a safe, stable, nurturing and permanent home is key to improving life chances and educational attainment of looked after children.

I believe that local partners – councils especially – need to focus on delivering a one-placement system – so where possible children experience only one placement while in care, reducing disruption to their lives. Timescales for reaching decisions about permanence and adoption should be reduced.

We have seen the role of corporate parenting evolving and improving over the years. However, much more needs to be done. Every child in care needs a named corporate parent who champions their needs and aspirations.
Children can not be successful learners if their health needs are not identified and met. Local health services should take on a much more engaged role as corporate parents, and provide health assessments within four weeks of a child coming into care, share information with the councils and make access to services easier.

The educational attainment of those who are looked after at home is particularly poor, and the Scottish Government recognises the need to provide better support for parents of these children.

Finally, we recognise that the leaver destinations for looked after young people and careleavers are significantly poorer than their peers, and we are prioritising support for this group to access learning and jobs.

At the Education and Culture Committee meeting I agreed to provide the Committee with additional information on a number of points. This information is provided in Annex A. I welcome the Committee's interest in the educational attainment of looked after children, and I am looking forward to seeing the Committee's report following the inquiry.

Yours truly,

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Annex A
Additional Information

Donaldson Review of Teacher Education
As indicated to the Committee, the Scottish Government has set up a National Partnership Group to take forward many of the main recommendations from 'Teaching Scotland's Future', the report from Graham Donaldson's review of teacher education. The group is co-chaired by the Association of Directors of Education and the Scottish Teacher Education Committee (representing the universities), alongside Scottish Government.

The group met its first major milestone by submitting its workplan to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning by the end of September. The workplan will shortly be available on the National Partnership Group's web-pages: www.npqteachereducation.org.

Broadly speaking the current phase of the plan involves detailed work on how implementation of Graham Donaldson's recommendations will be rolled out. This phase will run to June 2012, after which the National Partnership Group will focus on embedding and evaluating those changes.

More specifically the workplan sets out key milestones for a number of changes that will be important for improving the educational attainment of looked after children, amongst other groups. These include the review of early phase programmes (across initial teacher education and induction) to ensure they are more clearly focused on priorities in teacher education, which will be completed for the start of academic session 2013-14. In relation to career-long professional learning, means for identifying priority areas for professional learning, and arrangements for disseminating these to all schools, will be in place for start of school session 2012-13.

Measuring Attainment
Curriculum for Excellence sets out the expectation that learners achievements, including attainment should be recognised, profiled and reported. Building the Curriculum 5 set out the framework for the assessment and recording of learning in its broadest sense. The guidance recognises that schools and other education establishments hold a range of information about the progress and achievements of learners, including class assessment records, tracking records, attainment data and information on support for learning. Learners themselves will hold additional information which they should be supported to recognise and contribute to the information held by the establishment. This means that learners should have their broad learning achievements, whether they take place in school or elsewhere, recognised and set out as part of profiling.

As part of our statistical collections we are able to link looked after children's information to wider statistical information, such as attendance, absence, exclusion, attainment and positive sustained destinations, for example. This will enable monitoring of outcomes for looked after children and young people, alongside all other children and young people in a range of indicators over time.

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