Introduction
This contribution is based on findings from inspections and scrutiny of regulated care services, social work services and the multi-agency inspection of services to protect children. Regulated care services relevant to looked after children include nurseries, child minding, fostering and adoption services, housing support services for care leavers and residential care, including secure care. Our response is also informed by our wider work on thematic areas and by the views of young people that we meet with as part of our work.

A fundamental principle in achieving good outcomes for young people has to be asking those who are looked after need what they think makes a difference in helping them to achieve in school if they are looked after. We need to listen to those who experience these services and understand how they experience them, good and bad. These young people need to be able to influence the changes that need to be made. We have found that taking this approach consistently leads to more child centred practice across all levels of service provision. Work that we recently undertook found some good evidence of this at a whole system level in a number of places including Clackmannanshire, Scottish Highlands and West Lothian.

All staff who work with or who have contact with children who are looked after need to understand the impact of abuse, neglect, poor parenting and disrupted attachments. It is essential they are able to understand the potential causal factors that might be impacting on a young person’s ability to work effectively in a school environment. Inspection experience tells us that the level of understanding is variable across services and across the country.

Young people tell us about the importance of consistent relationships with the staff around them. They need to be able to build trusting relationships with these staff, who are able to understand their lives, needs and can advocate on their behalf. This is challenging to achieve where there are frequent changes of allocated workers such as social workers, or where they are having to move placements.

We offer this submission to aid the discussion that will take place when we give our oral evidence.

Implementation of existing legislation and guidance
There is a plethora of initiatives that are aimed at addressing the needs of this group. There now needs to be a focus on enabling the effective delivery of structures and policies that are already in place, rather than creating new pilots. This will also help to ensure a more consistent access to support services across the country.
We have not seen evidence that the ASL Act and the amendments from last year have added greatly to the co-ordination and support for most looked after children, and particularly for children looked after at home. The connection between any possible co-ordinated support plan and care planning has not been evident from our work.

Corporate parenting is a term that is now well embedded within local authority areas. “These are our bairns” provides helpful guidance but more work needs to be done on ensuring all those responsible have a full understanding of their part in implementing it.

It is less clear what this means in practice and whether there is evidence of the impact that corporate parenting initiatives are making for looked after young people. Senior officials and elected members need to be accountable for the work that is done to improve outcomes for these young people. In order to achieve this:

- Looked after young people need to be given priority in service planning
- Chief officers and senior managers need to demonstrate effective leadership in partnership working between departments and services within the local authority as well as with partner agencies, including the third sector
- Senior managers need to ensure they take decisive action to remove bureaucratic and organisational barriers to achieving the best possible outcomes for looked after children
- Chief officers and senior managers need to identify clear priorities for improving services for looked after children, rigorously monitor progress against these aims and constructively challenge each other when progress is too slow
- Senior managers need to ensure all staff, at all levels, clearly understand their corporate parenting responsibilities and what they are required to do to improve the outcomes for looked after children in their day to day work
- The difference that any corporate approach is making to the outcomes for looked after children must be properly understood and evidenced.

**School support**
The programme of joint inspections of services to protect children has highlighted difficulties for some children in getting the help they need to recover from abusive and neglectful experiences. The majority of looked after children require, at the very least, sensitive and understanding responses to help them make sense of their experiences, address emotional difficulties and develop coping strategies.

Improving educational outcomes for children who are looked after can not be achieved by only focusing on the support available within the classroom. Their capacity for learning and to make the most of their educational experiences will be compromised by unaddressed mental health issues. Limited capacity in child and adolescent mental health services and specialist counselling services mean these are usually prioritised for children with a specific diagnosis or whose difficulties are already acute. Dedicated looked after children’s nurses have been a very helpful development in some areas of the country, including facilitating smoother access to mental health services. However,
these posts are not in place in all areas of the country and limited capacity restricts LAC nurses’ input to children who are looked after and accommodated, in most cases.

More services are required to help looked after children develop positive mental health and address lower level anxieties and behaviour difficulties. Carers and staff who are involved in working with children need to be able to readily access constructive and realistic advice, guidance and support to help them meet the needs of looked after young people.

Recent Scottish Government publication shows looked after children are significantly more likely to be excluded from school than their peers. It is of particular concern that the figures show proportionally higher exclusion rates for looked after children in primary schools. Schools need to develop effective strategies to help children manage their distress and possible disruptive behaviour within the schools.

**Supporting parents and carers**

Purposeful intervention is needed with families. Care planning needs to be based on informed assessments of children’s needs and this must include their educational needs. Social workers responsible for identifying placements for young people need to be better equipped at understanding each child’s educational progress, targets, attainment levels and potential.

We have found that generally care planning for children and young people, particularly for those looked after at home needs to be far more focused. Plans must be outcome focused, identify how success will be recognised, be specific about what action will be required to achieve the outcomes, name who is responsible for achieving it and state when the action will be completed by.

Care plans must be robustly monitoring and challenged. Amendments should be made quickly where progress is slow or not happening towards desired outcomes. In relation to educational attainment, the care plans therefore need to clearly state what is going to happen, why, who is responsible for it and when it will be achieved. This links with the need for a better understanding of making corporate parenting a day to day reality for these young people. The agencies that implement care plans must be held to account for their role in making them a success.

In addition we know that care planning arrangements are often not as robust for those children looked after at home as they are for those looked after away from home. These are the children even more at risk of poor educational attainment. Parents of these children are likely to be the ones where there may be issues of substance misuse or mental ill health. This can lead to difficulties for services making effective working alliances. Together, services need to find more effective ways to engage with parents to enable them to better support their child’s attendance and behaviour within school. This is important to enable children to get the most out of their school attendance and to break any patterns that might become established for later on in their school life.
There needs to be a greater focus on getting plans right for this group of children.

Parents have told us that they want to understand better what they need to do to change things, to make things better in their family. As often the primary participants in their child’s care plan, they need to be able to understand what everyone, including themselves, is expected to be doing.

Support is needed for parents that we know makes a difference, that is based on robust evidence and that can last for as long as is required. For children and young people looked after at home, this may be for some considerable period of time.

Reducing the number of moves experienced by any looked after child should be a priority but ensuring a sufficient wide range of placement options is available to allow each child to receive care suitable to meet his or her needs is likely to remain a significant challenge in most areas. Work is required to help local authorities develop and implement support for kinship care. We have seen evidence that this is increasing, but there remain difficulties in providing the right levels of support, both financially and practically. We know that the support of the carer is critical in supporting a child’s educational attainment.

Where a placement move is inevitable, or indeed in the child’s best interests, attention needs to be paid to managing the transition, ensuring decisions which directly impact on a child’s experiences are not affected by bureaucratic delays or inefficient systems. A frequent issue that causes a delay in school attendance can be the process of putting in place transport for a child to attend their previous school where their placement has changed.

A number of local authorities are beginning to experience success in reducing delays in placing young children who require alternative permanent placements. The quicker such permanent decisions can be made, the less likely these children are to become part of the larger picture of looked after children struggling to get the most out of schools.

Roles of central and local government
We have commented in the earlier section on legislation and guidance about the impact of corporate parenting and the crucial role local authorities have in this, and do not therefore intend to repeat that here.

There have been some clear successes within the private and voluntary specialist sector for looked after and accommodated children and young people in terms of enabling them to manage their behaviour and thrive within a mainstream school environment. Local authorities need to learn from what works within these services and use this to inform their commissioning approaches to purchased and provided services. Local authorities therefore need to be clear in their expectation of what responsibilities the commissioned services have towards achieving educational attainment for young people they look after.
The role of scrutiny in driving up improvements
The multi-agency inspection of child protection services have demonstrated that and inspection focus on shared accountability for better outcomes for vulnerable children can drive up improvements.

In the Care Inspectorate there is now an opportunity to develop scrutiny processes that will lead to a better focus on outcomes. Inspections of services for children are being planned on a multi-agency basis to emphasise the collective responsibility that is held by all services for these young people. Across services Chief Officers, senior managers and elected members can be held accountable for improving outcomes for these young people in the same way that they have taken on this responsibility for children in need of protection.