The remit of the Committee's inquiry is to consider the reasons why more significant progress has not been made since devolution in improving the educational attainment of looked after children and what can be done to address this.

Introduction
We know from the most recent statistics that on 31st July 2010 there were 15,892 looked after children in Scotland, of whom 6,193 were looked after at home; 4,996 with foster carers or prospective adopters; 3,223 in other community placements and 1,480 in residential care. These figures amount to an increase of four per cent since March 31, 2009. The number of children looked after has increased every year since 2001, and is at its highest since 1982.

We acknowledge that the educational attainment of looked after children is poorer than children who are not looked after. COSLA supports the aspiration of We Can and Must Do Better that we should not set a lower aspiration for looked after children than we do for other children. However, the task of raising attainment for looked after children remains a challenge as recent statistics demonstrate. This enquiry comes after a sustained period of policy development and implementation and we think it is a good time to draw breath and analyse what we have achieved to date. There is no question for us of the commitment made by councils and other partners to improve life chances for looked after children. The fact that we appear to have made less progress that we would have liked is down to the complexity of the task facing us.

This inquiry is therefore an opportunity to debate the range of multifaceted and complex issues which impact on looked after children and the ability of public agencies to effect meaningful and sustained change. We think that this is a wide debate that should include cultural, social, and economic deprivation and its direct correlation with poor educational attainment.

While a number of children confront and overcome this reality on a daily basis, there are a number of children for whom family and parenting factors compound the situation. The absence of a nurturing and stable family environment is a well established contributing factor to poor attainment, and Looked after children are at greater risk of poor attainment due to their greater likelihood of experiencing a chaotic upbringing.

We know that such home environments do not help children learn; nor are they supportive of ongoing study. If not resolved children can arrive at nursery and school without the basic social skills which allow children from more stable background to settle into the learning environment. In the longer term this and other factors can lead to poor attendance and a much higher risk of not only poor educational attainment, but also a range of negative outcomes including an increased chance of becoming involved with
the criminal justice system. Young people in this situation are more likely to become looked after, but we should not lose sight of the wider group of young people who are risk of poor attainment but never enter the formal care system. The same contributing factors influence the prospect of all vulnerable children, but manifest themselves in a particular way for looked after children.

At the start of a new Parliamentary term it is also perhaps a good time to debate the ethical and moral issues which underlie policy on looked after children. We know that local authorities are faced on a daily basis with the difficult task of balancing the needs of the child with those of the family, and have the unenviable task of taking decision which can result in children being removed from the family. Few would argue that the needs of the child should not come first, but in practice the timing, the level and extent of any intervention is always a delicate balancing act that can have long term implications (including on educational attainment) for the child. It is within this context that local authorities operate, and in which local government is tackling both the underlying causes of poor attainment and supporting children who are currently within the care system.

Key Issues
The following is a summary of the key points we wish to make:

- **Stability and Continuity of Care**: Children benefit from stable home environments where they are supported and encouraged;
- **Prevention as well as cure**: We need to treat the underlying causes of poor attainment (and indeed other outcomes) at the same time as supporting children within and outside the formal care system; and
- **Working together**: All partners need to continue to work together in a co-ordinated manner.

Stability and Continuity of Care
It is clear that providing looked after children with a stable, nurturing environment as quickly as possible is one of the best ways of delivering better outcomes for children. If children have a stable, supportive home-life they will be more ready to learn and do well throughout their lives. One of the most recent articulations of this was in the SCRA Report “Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland” which was published earlier this year.

While the report dealt with permanence and adoption, its messages were relevant to a much wider group of looked after young people who remain at home or in contact with their birth families. The report highlights actions taken to keep children looked after at home and raised a pertinent political point in terms of the professional dilemmas in maintaining the rights of the child while ensuring the rights of parents are not abused.

The report highlighted a number of procedural issues that could be improved to quicken the pace of permanence and adoption. These are now being addressed by the Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group. However, at it heart was also the issue
which we mentioned in the introduction to this submission that there is a need for a wider debate on the role of state and how far it should go to try and keep families together.

It is also important to stress the importance of continuity of care planning which takes into account entry and exit from the care system. Transition in and out of care has long been established as a priority area for improvement and has received considerable attention over the last few years. For younger children this may involve returning to their family, but for older children transition out of care can mean potentially coping without the informal support which families provide to young adults when they first leave home.

When older children are moving on from looked after status it is important that they are supported, as we know that former looked after children are more likely to not continue their education after school age, and to be unemployed as a result. Transition out of care processes are in place which are supportive and aim to result in positive destinations for those leaving care. We are aware of local authorities who have programmes in place where they provide vocational training from age 14 in schools, and supported work training places for school leavers. We are also aware of programmes such as Activity Agreements which can provide vulnerable young people with additional support at a key point in their lives.

**Prevention as well as cure**

There are a number of initiatives which are designed to help parents and children, and reduce the likelihood of more formal measures being required later in life. A good example of this is The Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) early intervention programme, that aims to support first-time teenage mothers, and which is being piloted in Edinburgh. The pilot programme is a nurse-delivered, intensive, home-based intervention that is initiated during pregnancy. It aims to improve pregnancy outcomes as well as child health and development. It also assists families get ready for school, and encourages achievement and parental self-sufficiency.

Another example which appears to be having positive results is where local authorities have developed Nurture Strategies. Nurture classes and staff are supported by local authority educational psychologists. The classes provide help and support children who have not settled into the classroom environment. They are intended to help children who may be disruptive and may even be at risk of future exclusion. The nurture class helps to reintegrate the pupils into the mainstream classes where they and their classmates can continue with their learning.

Councils have considerable experience of dealing with adult literacy provision, so the focus on early intervention offers an opportunity to tackle literacy issues before they have the chance to become problems. We support campaigns such as PlayTalkRead which encourage behaviours that are known to help early language development and cognitive skills — essential stepping stones towards the later development of literacy skills.
On literacy a number of councils are now working with their educational psychologists to deliver specific programme, such as the North Lanarkshire active literacy model. The model makes no distinction in its provision relating to looked after children; rather, it focuses on all children entering primary school with below average literacy abilities. This model has been piloted in North Lanarkshire primary schools and will continue to track achievement and attainment of these pupils into their secondary education. This model is now being picked up by a number of authorities, and is only one example of the support provided across the country.

**Working Together**
Local authorities are the corporate parents of all looked after children. Over the last few years COSLA has put its full weight behind developing thinking and encouraging the adoption of corporate parenting policy, not least by supporting the guidance ‘These are our Bairns’. We have also promoted the importance of corporate parenting to a wide group of elected member across Scotland. We are aware that councils have adopted a variety of approaches to corporate parenting, including the appointment of senior officer and member ‘champions’. We would expect individual responses from local authorities to describe local approaches in more detail.

*These are our Bairns* also addresses the importance of public sector agencies sharing corporate parenting responsibilities. For example, given the health needs of looked after children it is as important for health boards to be part of the ‘Corporate Family’ as it is for local authorities. The role of Community Planning Partnerships at developing integrated models of care is something that we will see explored in some detail over the course of this Parliament as we respond to both the Christie report into public sector reform, and also prepare for future children’s services legislation. COSLA is committed to playing a lead role in this debate.

COSLA is an active member of The Looked After Children’s Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG) which was formed to lead and drive forward an implementation programme for looked after children and young people. LACSIG has a work stream dedicated to raising educational achievement and attainment of looked after young people as a means of improving long-term outcomes.

In recognising the challenges associated with meeting the needs of Looked After children at home, children with disabilities and early learning and development, the LACSIG learning hub has developed the following priorities: to work on raising attainment and measuring and recording achievements of looked after children; to assist the looked after children’s workforce to provide educational support to looked after children, and to ensure that effective data-sharing takes place to improve the educational experience and outcomes for looked after children. Additionally, the learning hub has identified a number of delivery mechanisms which include using the *Curriculum for Excellence* as a way of measuring achievement, and encouraging early literacy for looked after children by providing information and support to carers.
Members of the Committee may also be interested that we have also played a lead role at driving up service standards in secure care. Following publication of the National Residential Child Care Initiative (NRCCI) and the Securing Our Future Initiative (SOFI), a major work stream was developed by COSLA, Scottish Government and secure care providers to put in place a new child-centred secure care contract. The contract and service specification was designed with stakeholders to raise standards within the sector and to clarify roles and responsibilities of both purchasers (Local authorities and Scottish Government) and providers. The contract includes a number of learning outcomes for children and young people within an outcomes-focused performance monitoring framework. This was a particularly detailed piece of work so if the committee is interested we can provide further detail on the secure care contract, and our plans for the ongoing development and improvement of secure provision in Scotland. The Committee should also be aware that we are currently exploring with partners – in particular Scotland Excel and Scottish Government – opportunities to build on our experience of secure care by developing thinking around commissioning of both fostering and residential care.

As part of this inquiry we would also expect members of the Committee to be interested in development of the Doran Review. COSLA plays a lead role on the Doran review which is looking at learning provision for children with complex additional support needs. The interim report for the review is available on the Scottish Government website. The future direction of the Doran review will have an impact on young people both within and outside the formal care system.

**Conclusion**

As we said in the introduction we think it is timely for the Committee to be revisiting the issue of looked after children’s attainment. There has over the last few years an enormous amount of effort put in by the public and voluntary sectors to improve outcomes for looked after children. This submission gives some information on work at the local and national level. Improving outcomes for vulnerable children – whether within or outside the care system - remains an extremely complex and challenging task. The fact that we may not have made as much progress as we would have liked should not be taken as a lack of effort, or will, but a reflection of the challenge we face as a country. COSLA is happy to provide the Committee with additional information as required, and to play a constructive role in the future of this inquiry.