Fife Council Children’s Services welcome the intention of the Education and Culture Committee to hold an inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children, to examine 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. Published statistics, including the most recent dataset (June 2010), consistently demonstrate poorer educational outcomes for looked after children, with predictable negative consequences for life chances, particularly in relation to employment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and by implication general health and wellbeing issues.

As Corporate Parents we are committed to doing all that we can to ensure that this situation does not continue, representing as it does a huge loss of human potential and a significant enduring cost to society. We would caution however that there is no simple or easy single solution to this complex problem. Improvement will only come about as the result of sustained and targeted evidence based multi-agency intervention. In particular we would strongly urge the Committee to avoid seeing solutions as lying wholly within one part of the life cycle of children.

Nor we believe, should the Committee overlook progress that has been made. We would particularly wish to acknowledge the quality of the resources produced as a result of the ‘We Can and Must Do Better’ initiative, and the recent establishment of the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland at the University of Strathclyde. This latter development has great potential to build on the experience and expertise which undoubtedly exist in Scotland, and to act as a catalyst and focus for further research and sharing of effective practice. We would commend these developments as a significant advance on the previously established more piecemeal and oversimplified developments which have had little observable effect in terms of improving outcomes for looked after children.

We divide our evidence to the Committee into two key sections – **Contributing Factors** and **Ways Forward**. In the first section we identify what we believe to be key factors impacting on looked after children’s educational development, and in the second we describe broadly measures which we have taken in Fife to address these areas, and further work requiring to be undertaken. We do not consider any evidence that we offer to be completely novel; rather it is drawn from the extensive experience of a range of professionals responsible for service delivery on the ground and is, we believe, robust and substantial. Importantly we believe it gives us a strong framework for understanding the nature of the challenge we face to make progress, and a basis for improvement.
Contributing factors

1. Early experiences: There is little doubt that some looked after children experience disadvantage from conception. Often this will be related to their parents’ own experience of disadvantage, for example as a result of drug or alcohol misuse, maternal health issues, poor nutrition, or inadequate housing, or indeed their own experience of poor parenting. This very early experience can have a highly significant impact on foetal development, with negative consequences for a number of aspects of future development. Such disadvantage can be compounded by early post natal experiences in relation to both nurture and cognitive enrichment, and there is now clear scientific evidence to demonstrate the effect of limited early experience on neurological development, with predictable consequences for future learning and socialisation. Some of this early disadvantage has formative effects that are difficult to retrieve, depending on its depth and extent.

2. Supporting learning: Children are ready to learn when they are emotionally stable, with secure attachments to key care givers, are free of threat and risk and attend school on a regular and consistent basis, and are supported by key role models who value education and actively support learning. Looked after children can, as a result of their experiences or circumstances, lack some or all of these supports, with negative consequences for learning and progression. By definition, those children who cross the threshold of risk and threat to an extent where they require to be removed from their parents’ responsibility represent the population of greatest disadvantage in our society.

3. Preconditions of stability: Children and young people benefit in their learning from consistency. This refers to teaching methods and approaches and to relationships, with both peers and adults within a school community. This is especially true where children do not feel secure within their care placement. We should not underestimate the impact of changes which result in children moving school, requiring them to form and reform relationships, and to adjust to different methods and practices. As a result of earlier experiences looked after children may be least well equipped to deal positively with such events, which would pose a challenge for any child or young person.

4. Valuing education/supporting transition: Children and young people learn most effectively when they see purpose and relevance in their learning. For young people of secondary age this most often relates to future employment opportunities, and is influenced by the support and modelling behaviour of key adults. For looked after children the process of transition into the world of education and work beyond school can be particularly challenging if key adults are unable to provide the right type of support, particularly if the process of being looked after ends too abruptly, with inadequate planning or resourcing for next steps.
Ways forward
1. Within Fife, as part of our response to the GIRFEC agenda, we have established multi-agency Getting it Right in Fife (GIR) Groups in seven local areas. These groups play a key role in co-ordinating and monitoring the execution of the Corporate Parent role by the Council and Community Planning Partners in respect of looked after children. This is done by:
   - Ensuring co-ordinated service delivery to the most vulnerable children and families in a local area, reflecting a shared commitment to effective evidence based practice. The multi-agency composition of the groups means that they can address the range of factors noted above, including health, parenting and criminal justice issues.
   - Monitoring the educational progress of looked after children. Schools within an area report to every meeting of the local GIR group on the progress of all looked after children, with the intention of ensuring there is an appropriate response when areas of significant difficulty impacting on a child’s progress, are identified.
   - Monitoring the progress of children in residential house placements. All of Fife Council residential houses for children and young people, and residential provision run by independent providers within Fife, report to every meeting of the GIR groups on children’s progress, using the SHANARRI framework. This information is triangulated with the information provided by schools, and again the need for intervention in critical situations is identified and co-ordinated.
   - Reviewing children in purchased placements. Some of Fife’s looked after children cannot at present be accommodated within Fife Council resources. GIR groups have a responsibility for a monitoring function in respect of these young people, in particular considering what provision or resource gaps might have contributed to the need to make such placements, and ensuring that an appropriate plan is in place for any young person who is returning to Fife from a purchased placement.

2. A critical aspect of our work in addressing the needs of looked after children is accurate identification of the population. We have tackled this by establishing a collaborative initiative whereby the Social Work Service has responsibility for updating information regarding Fife children’s looked after status on the Education Service management information system, Phoenix e1. The responsibility for updating the status of non Fife LAC in Fife schools, about whom the Social Work service may be unaware, remains with schools. This work is at a relatively early stage, but it is already showing signs of offering much higher levels of accuracy in ensuring all looked after children are correctly identified, and has been welcomed by schools.

3. Considerable progress has been made in developing the single shared child’s plan within Fife and this planning framework is being increasingly used as we move towards universal adoption. We have developed data sharing protocols involving partner agencies and are extending a highly successful pilot project in one secondary school which uses the Education Service management
information system to ensure that key information is shared timeously about children, including looked after children, who have been the subject of a cause for concern referral. We have also established a protocol for planning the educational placement of looked after children who are the responsibility of other authorities, who are placed in residential care in Fife. We also seek to apply the principles of this protocol when Fife children are placed outwith Fife. The effectiveness of this process would lead us to encourage the Scottish Government to establish an agreed national protocol, building on the relevant looked after children regulations. In our experience observance of the regulations concerning the notification of local authorities when a looked after child is placed in their area for care is, at best, patchy.

4. Within Fife we have well established systems for post school transition planning, based on the guidance contained within More Choices More Chances and the subsequent 16+ Learning Choices initiative. Within these systems schools and partner agencies pay particular attention to the needs of looked after children, as one of a number of vulnerable groups. We recognise the need to prioritise the development of employability skills for looked after young people, aware of the persistently poor employment outcomes for this group. Further work needs to be done in this area, and schemes such as ‘soft skill’ development, mentoring and the ‘Family Firms’ offer real opportunities. The Scottish Government’s commitment to such approaches is welcomed.

5. Analysis of outcomes for looked after children. While we are in no doubt that educational outcomes for looked after children are unacceptably poor, we would encourage consideration of developing more appropriate and sensitive measures than those currently used. There are two aspects to this. We are not convinced that basic measures of attainment, and the related ‘tariff scores model’, offer an appropriate basis for evaluating educational progress. They fail to measure ‘value added’, which despite relatively low scores can be considerable, nor do they reflect wider achievement, which is an area in which some looked after children can excel, particularly when the more formal aspects of the curriculum have been challenging or indeed inaccessible to them. Secondly we have some reservations about the basis on which outcomes for looked after children are compared with the whole population. We believe a more valid and reliable comparative model would be based on pupil populations which more closely match the life circumstances of looked after children, who are much more likely to come from more disadvantaged socio economic groups. This we believe is important given the clear established link between social deprivation and educational progress for all children, irrespective of looked after status.

6. Finally, in our view there is unnecessary and unhelpful fragmentation between the individual planning and review systems for children in need at national level. In particular the parallel requirements of the regulations relating to looked after children, the ASL Act and GIRFEC mean that looked after children face great complexity with the associated bureaucracy. While we do what we can to
rationalise and simplify these processes at local level, we believe it is time to rationalise and simplify these processes nationally.

In summary, we are clear that action needs to be taken at both local and national levels to address the continuing under performance of looked after children in the Scottish education system. We believe that our response to this problem needs to involve all the agencies who support and work with looked after children and their families; it is not the fault or responsibility of any single agency, and all have an important contribution to make. This implies a need for genuine and effective co-ordination and joint working, making real the principles enshrined in GIRFEC. We would urge an avoidance of the previous approaches which, while well intentioned, were piecemeal, at times driven by emotion rather than analysis. Finally we need to ensure that we have in place robust quality improvement processes to both support and challenge the responses of local authorities and their partners to meeting the needs of this group of children and young people.