Thank you for inviting the Fostering Network to comment in response to the Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children. We wish to highlight the following:

The outcomes for looked after children remain very poor but should be and could be significantly higher.

Many looked after children come into the care system with a considerable record of educational difficulties and a poor pattern of school attendance and achievement. The later in their school career that many children become looked after the more likely it is that educational difficulties are firmly embedded.

Children coming into the looked after system may have experienced neglect, trauma or abuse, impacting on brain development. They may have been required to “parent” their own parents or siblings. They may have had little encouragement to attend school or to follow up opportunities for learning. They may not have had a reliable and trusted adult to support them and advocate on their behalf.

Many children are born into families where education attainment is still rated very low. The poor educational experiences many parents themselves have had may leave them with considerable anxieties about getting involved with their children’s schooling.

The latest statistics show marked variations in the attendance and achievements of looked after children, depending on their different placement settings. Encouragingly, for those in local authority foster care their % attendance was 96.3 and for those children in purchased foster care placements the figure was only marginally lower at 95.9%. These are considerably better % attendance than those for all looked after children, which is 87.8% and as low as 78% where the child is looked after but remains at home with their parents.

It is hardly surprising that frequent placement moves reduces the % attendance for all types of placements with 78.8% attendance for a young person who has had 6 or more placements. Inevitably with that number of moves it is likely young people have to move school, there may be a delay in obtaining a place in a new school, young people lose friendships and have to adapt to different learning approaches. All of this is likely to account for some of the reduced attendance levels.

In relation to placements with foster carers, if there is more choice of placements for each child then the likelihood is that children will be placed with foster carers who can best meet their individual needs, placements will last and disruptions decrease.
Recruiting more carers is vital to address this aspect of educational attainment by creating greater stability of school placement.

In Scotland, unlike the rest of the UK, there are no limits on the number of children a foster care household can accommodate. There are many foster carers with 4, 5 or six unrelated children placed at the same time, severely limiting the amount of individual attention which can be given to bedtime routines, play, reading to a child, homework, after school activities, etc.

Recruiting a sufficient number of foster carers to allow fewer children placed in any one household and the best possible matches to be made must be a priority. This is resource intensive and would mean there are foster carers without a placement, but ‘on call’ for the ‘right’ match. Consideration should be made for approved foster carers, with no children currently in placement, to provide classroom and playground support for looked after children struggling to settle in school.

The recent looked after children education statistics highlighted that the average tariff scores were higher for children in foster care when compared to any other settings for looked after children. The tariff score was 160 for local authority placements and 103 for purchased placements, as compared to 32 for children looked after at home and 66 for children in Local Authority residential care. The lower score comparing children with purchased foster placements as compared to LA placements may be attributed to the fact that children who are referred for purchased placements are often those who already had a significant number of placement disruptions and school exclusions. The same may also be true for children placed in residential care.

The Fostering Network works to help foster carers make a difference to children’s lives and achievements. By building sound relationships of trust over time and by showing consistent interest in the child’s education and making direct contacts with the child’s schools, foster carers can effect significant positive changes in children’s educational progress. Carers can encourage children to learn and give them a strong message that they can succeed. To succeed also requires commitment from school staff to work with the carers and not exclude them because they are not the birth parents.

Children with chequered educational early experiences will also need additional support in their learning. Mentors may also be able to support children with difficulties in settling into schools where they are moved because of their looked after status.

Sons and daughters of foster carers are often strong supporters of the foster child and help them to settle in school, help with homework and are often a positive role model, displaying enthusiasm for learning and modelling positive behaviours.

Young people in foster care often have little idea of when or where their next placement move will be or of decisions which may be made at an upcoming Children’s Hearing. This may significantly impact on a child’s or young person’s sense of self-worth and ability to concentrate.
The role of foster carers
Our view is that foster carers need to be seen as the first educators for the children they foster. We need to ensure foster carers are trained, supported and empowered to proactively support children to achieve their potential.

Sonia Jacksons study, *Going to University from Care* found that overwhelmingly young people in foster care who go to university attribute their success to their foster carers’ unwavering and continual support, along with a genuine belief that the young person can and will succeed. Our anecdotal evidence is that this is true in Scotland. Additionally young people need the chance to remain with their foster carers post 18. Lessons can be learned from the *Fostering Achievement scheme*. In 2006 the Government in Northern Ireland provided a grant to the Fostering Network to set up and manage the *Fostering Achievement scheme*.

The project treats foster carers as the first educators and allows them to request and access equipment and resources to help the children they foster:

- gain a sense of achievement
- realise their potential
- make their dreams come true.

This aim is being achieved on a daily basis throughout Northern Ireland with children and young people learning new skills, developing and enhancing natural talents, pursuing new interests, improving learning and gaining a real sense of self-worth and achievement.

Fostering Achievement views education in its broadest sense and promotes learning and development in a variety of ways with great emphasis placed on both fun and safety. The Fostering Network would welcome a similar initiative in Scotland. For more information see the Fostering Achievement website at [www.fosteringachievement.net](http://www.fosteringachievement.net).

The Fostering Network is planning a demonstration programme to introduce a social pedagogic approach into foster care. This will be delivered by the Fostering Network in partnership with a range of local authority and fostering agencies (four in England and two in Scotland) and will demonstrate the impact that introducing a social pedagogic approach can make to foster carers and the lives of the children they foster and by doing so will improve the educational outcomes and wellbeing for children in care and ensure more can fulfil their potential.

The Fostering Network has an active learning and development programme for foster carers but there are currently no requirements about the training that foster carers should undergo in the first year or two as a foster carer. A greater emphasis on learning and development for foster carers would be, in our view, an essential component in a strategy to train, support and empower foster carers to improve the educational outcomes and overall wellbeing of children growing up in foster care.