I work with an organisation called Circle. I am Project Manager of the Families Affected by Imprisonment (FABI) team. We meet women and men while they are in prison and support them and their families in the community pre & post release. We provide support to many families where the children are known to social work. Many of the adult prisoners we support have themselves been in the care system. Also, I was a foster carer for ten years looking after mainly teenage children, which provided great insight into the lives of ‘looked after’ children.

My contribution is therefore based on my experience of working directly with children and adults whose educational attainment has not resulted in the meaningful outcomes society would have hoped for despite an incredible amount of resources having been expended. I would suggest the following be considered:

1. All foster carers should be qualified in child care or working toward an award in child care and that continuing professional development is formally built in.

2. Hearings should be held in the evening, weekends and during school holidays for children attending school.

3. When children are involved in giving evidence in court against offenders the court should try to ensure the cases are held during school holidays. One child I ‘looked after’ had to give evidence against her parent in the High Court while sitting her Highers. The education and criminal justice system failed to respond in any meaningful way. In my opinion the victim was further victimised.

4. The current model of placing children with families should be reconsidered in the light of a changing society. I have evidence to prove that children placed with me thrived but I found there to be many challenges which included the fact the ‘looked after’ children became jealous of my birth children which caused them pain which played out in a variety of behaviours. I came to realise there are a multiplicity of inherent difficulties in a child being placed in a family home however well intentioned the carer is. It is my view a different model of care is possible. It is a fact the general population as a whole are living and working longer.

My suggestion with regard to a new model for providing a home for looked after children would include 2 adult care givers, who ideally have themselves raised children, sharing a home with 3-4 children in an ‘ordinary house’ on a live-in, full time basis. The care givers would act as parent figures to the children providing continuous care.
I believe the model I suggest has many strengths which include the fact the care givers and the children are on neutral territory which would be incredibly valuable for both the children and the adults for many reasons. Also, the adults looking after the children would have previous experience of raising children and could provide evidence of the outcomes of their parenting style in terms of educational attainment with regard to children they parented. This in turn would inform the expected direction of travel for the educational outcomes for any looked after children placed with them. It is my view this model could be tested to see if it worked.