Education and Culture Committee
Inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children

Scottish Children’s Services Coalition (SCSC)

Introduction:

- This submission is made collectively by members of the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition - a policy-focused collaboration between leading third sector and independent children’s services providers who deliver residential care, independent advocacy advice and representation and special education for children with complex needs.
- As expert providers of specialist education and care services for looked after children and organisations with a child centred focus, we welcome the Committee’s inquiry into this important matter.
- Our submission makes the following key points:

  1. There is a clear and linear relationship between the placement stability of looked after children, their educational attendance and educational attainment.

  2. There is a policy disconnect between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities on how best to deliver children’s services in Scotland.

  3. The recommendations proposed in the 2010 Audit Scotland report on ‘Looked After Children’ should be implemented in full, immediately.

  4. There needs to be a much more constructive dialogue between local authorities, the Scottish Government, children’s services advocacy organisations and third and independent sector service providers to improve outcomes for looked after children.

  5. Educational attainment, albeit significant, is not the only measure of success in children’s services.

Background to the SCSC:
The Scottish Children’s Services Coalition is a policy-focused collaboration between leading third sector and independent children’s services providers who deliver residential care and special education for children with complex needs. They also provide independent advocacy, advice and representation for children and young people who are looked after in Scotland, campaign for positive changes in the care system and consult with children and young people to ensure their voices are heard by policy makers both locally and nationally.

Members provide tailored support to children with complex needs from a diverse range of backgrounds and social circumstances. Many have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, sometimes brought on by being a victim of neglect or abuse, and/or complex developmental disabilities.
The Coalition came together in January of this year as we felt that there was a clear and demonstrable need for third sector and independent service providers to come together in order to address a number of worrying developments around the future of children’s services in Scotland and provide positive solutions to funding challenges. The need for outcomes based services, early intervention and preventative spend which invests in children and young people now is required to support a prosperous and sustainable future relieving pressure on stretched public service resources in the future.

From the perspective of the SCSC, we feel strongly that in many cases in Scotland we have all the tools we need to deliver better, more efficient and cost effective children’s services. Equally, there is broad agreement as how to achieve the best results for looked after children in Scotland. The problem is that there is a significant policy disconnect between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities in Scotland and a need for more effective working between the public and private sector.

**Context:**
During a debate in Parliament in November 2008 on the outcomes of Looked After Children in Scotland, the then Minister for Children & Young People, Adam Ingram MSP, said:

“Children in care are half as likely to leave school with any qualifications, they are more likely to be excluded from school and they are more likely to self-harm. Care leavers are less likely to be in employment and more likely to be in prison or homeless than their peers who have not been in care.”

Almost three years on, the outlook for far too many looked after children has not changed. As of 31st July 2010 there were 15,892 children being looked after by Scottish Local Authorities, which is the highest recorded figure since 1982. Placed against a backdrop of cuts to Local and Scottish Government budgets there is a very real danger that services will not be able to keep pace with demand. The result is not only poor educational attainment but also much more serious consequences such as ever increasing numbers of looked after children entering the prison system. With 25% of the current UK prison system having been in care at some point in their lives, this figure could feasibly grow.

The SCSC understands that the inquiry by the Committee is focused on why more significant progress has not been made with looked after children since devolution, and what can be done to remedy the situation.

There have been a plethora of policy documents over the last 11 years in Scottish politics which are all well intentioned and in principle pose benefits for some of

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Scotland’s most vulnerable children. However, where local authorities and successive Scottish administrations have fallen short is largely on agreeing how best to implement these policies and ultimately how they will be financed.

While this paper could provide a chronological assessment of policy developments such as the HMie (2008) report on “Count us in”\(^4\) the implementation of Additional Support Learning (ASL) for looked after children, carers and mental health (2010)\(^5\) and “We can and must do better” (2007)\(^6\), we believe the most effective route will be to focus be on Audit Scotland’s (2010) report on “Getting it right for children in residential care”\(^7\).

To provide a more specific answer to the scope of the Committee Inquiry into the plight of looked after children, this response will look at three key areas:

1. The linear relationship between placement stability, educational attendance and educational attainment
2. The lack of progress in implementing the 2010 Audit Scotland report
3. Re-defining success

**The linear relationship between placement stability, educational attendance and educational attainment**

There is a clear and identifiable relationship between placement stability, the educational attendance of looked after children, and their educational attainment. Fundamentally, this means that if a child is placed in an appropriate setting, which meets their needs, they are far more likely to attend school and attain SQA qualifications. Conversely, if the placement does not meet the child’s needs then they are far more likely to not attend school and receive fewer if any qualifications. There is also likely to follow multiple placement breakdown which impact on education, confidence and relationships.

This assertion is backed by Scottish Government statistics, which show that a looked after child is more likely to achieve on average higher tariff scores if they go through only one or two placements. As the number of placements increases their educational attainment decreases.

The reasons for this are clear and are well documented. The failure to ensure a suitably specialist environment capable of meeting the needs of children who are victims of abuse or neglect and who may have extremely challenging behaviour, results in placement breakdown, and disruption and instability for vulnerable children. Such

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experiences exacerbate emotional and behavioural problems, causing direct impacts on attachment and trust between looked after children and their carers.

Conversely, if a stable placement is found, and appropriate levels of support provided, it follows that educational attainment can be enhanced. The SCSC believes that there needs to be a renewed focus on ensuring that children are placed in the most appropriate setting to meet their needs at the earliest possible opportunity.

This is borne out by data from the SCSC membership which indicates that educational attainment can be achieved by even young people with the most challenging needs, once a stable placement has been found for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)</th>
<th>CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER BY SCSC MEMBERS</th>
<th>CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Attendance * Measured by total school days versus attendance</td>
<td>Primary 95.8% Secondary 96.9% Combined 96.35%</td>
<td>Primary 93.6% Secondary 82.1% Combined 87.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent exclusions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of SCQF awards at Level 3 or better for children who attend classes at your organisation * Based on SQA tariff scores.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lack of progress in implementing the 2010 Audit Scotland report
As a means of improving placement stability, educational attendance and ultimately educational attainment, the SCSC recommends the root and branch implementation of the 2010 Audit Scotland Report on ‘Getting it right for children in residential care’. The key points of this report, where placement stability is considered, include:

1. Councils should in partnership with providers, identify intended outcomes for all children in residential placements, specify these in individual care plans and set out the actions required in a clear SMART44 action plan against which progress can be monitored.

2. Councils should have in place full contractual agreements with independent providers, and service level agreements with in-house provision, which include details of the specific care and intended outcomes for each child.

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3. The Scottish Government and COSLA should identify, in collaboration with councils, NHS boards and independent providers, the factors that lead to better long-term outcomes for looked after children.

4. Councils along with NHS boards, should implement full joint budgeting that includes social work, education and health where possible, or establish a more standard approach to funding residential school placements that would reduce the need for negotiation on a case-by case basis.

5. Councils should develop an understanding of the costs of different types of placement, including the full costs of their in-house provision and how it varies with occupancy.

6. The Scottish Government and COSLA should increase the pace of development of a national strategic approach to commissioning specialist services for small numbers of children.

To date, there has been an inconsistent and inadequate implementation of these recommendations. As such the SCSC would urge the Committee to fully investigate this issue and seek assurances from the Scottish Government as to their commitment to these principles.

**Re-defining success**
Currently, outcomes for looked after children are measured in accordance with national indicators such as educational attainment. At the SCSC, we believe this is often a poor reflection of true progress. It is essential that outcome measurements for looked after children focus on ascertaining what positive development is being made as a result of the care or special education received.

Outcomes for looked-after young people or those with complex ASN must be measured in both social and educational terms, demonstrating a trajectory towards successful adulthood. Progress in social and emotional wellbeing can make an immeasurable improvement to the lives of children, yet are often the most difficult to quantify.

Ultimately it is up to the Scottish Government and COSLA to decide how best to measure indicators other than academic achievement. However, the SCSC feel it is important to take note of the important progress many looked after young people are making out with the conventional ways of measuring success.

**Conclusions**
SCSC members believe that despite great pressure on public finances, outcomes for looked-after children must be significantly improved. This can be achieved through effective commissioning practice and good partnership working between local authorities and high quality providers such as those in the independent and third sectors.
We urge the Committee to call on Local & National Government to adopt in full the recommendations of the Audit Scotland report on “Getting it right for children in residential care” and establish a new working relationship with independent and third sector providers based on equality, mutual respect and a desire to improve the delivery of children’s services across Scotland. The status quo is simply not an option given the financial challenges we all face.