SPTC is delighted to respond to the call for evidence from the Parliament's Education and Culture Committee on the question of the educational attainment of looked after children.

SPTC is a long-standing independent parents group and a registered charity which provides support to parents and carers all over Scotland. We provide membership services to individual Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns about any aspect of the education of their child, or the wider education system.

All of the research around looked-after children shows very clearly that their educational attainment is significantly impaired and the factors which lead to this situation are, again, well documented.

If we know that the involvement of parents in their children’s education leads to attainment gains – and we do - then it is logical that the reverse is true. Without a parent who is interested and involved, children and young people lose out on the encouragement, support and practical help the involved adult is able to offer. This gap is made more significant where a young person exhibits behavioural issues, slips into school refusing or in some other way finds themselves in a bad place at school.

Without an adult to speak up for them, to help problem solve and find solutions, it is easy to see that ‘dealing with the issue’ becomes the focus of the school, and educational attainment slips down the agenda.

As an organisation we know from experience that carers – foster parents, kinship carers or others – are very unlikely to engage with schools through parent groups. It appears their involvement tends to be crisis driven, dealing with issues and fire fighting rather than working with the school to plan and support learning.

We believe that the absence of an interested adult – whether a parent, carer or an advocate of some other kind – is a significant loss for any child and particularly for one whose life has been severely disrupted. This applies across education and other services, where the voice of the child may easily be lost.

We recommend therefore that work is done to develop a scheme which provides each looked-after child with an independent advocate who will represent the child’s interests and co-ordinate this across all services. We feel this approach is in tune with the proposed legislation on the Rights of the Child. The advocate will be charged with the task of working with the child, and carers if appropriate, to support their learning in a practical sense and in dealings with the school.
In addition to the role of Advocate, we believe there requires to be an onus on schools to respond positively to the needs of looked after children. There will certainly be areas of good practice: the challenge is to identify it, share it and ensure positive action is championed in schools.

While the reality is that many teachers and head teachers will understand the imperative and be enthusiastic about implementing measures which address the needs of a severely disadvantaged group of young people, experience tells us that this will not be a uniform reaction. It must therefore not be left to chance or good-will.

We believe there is a role for Education Scotland in the task of identifying and sharing best practice, and also in scrutinising implementation. We believe each school should have a senior teacher – principle or deputy head – with specific responsibility for ensuring the co-ordination of support for looked-after children, who would work alongside the Advocate.

Part of the shift required in some schools will be an understanding and response to the wider issues affecting the young person and the different agencies involved in supporting them. The concept of Additional Support Needs was introduced to ensure that all children who requires support – for whatever reason – receives it. ASL requires schools to work in partnership with the various agencies involved with a child. Self-evidently the system is not achieving its aim, since we continue to see significant differences in levels of attainment for looked-after children. Once again, we are confident there are areas where this is achieved but we have a long way to go.

We believe a review is required of practice around ASL for looked-after children with the objective that best practice would be identified and shared, and that each school is required to include specific action around looked-after children in their improvement plan, which will be subject to review and assessment annually.

Finally, we feel it has to be acknowledged that school is not the best learning environment for some teenagers and we must be prepared to be creative in finding alternative solutions which are designed around the needs of the individual. This takes us back to the role of the Advocate, who we envisage as playing a key role in ensuring the focus remains on the child and meeting his or her needs.

In Scotland we pride ourselves in being inclusive and caring for both individual and community: we believe strenuous efforts are required to turn around what amounts to a national disgrace in relation to the outcomes for looked-after children. We cannot afford for this to continue: the human and financial cost is quite simply too high.