The Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum warmly welcome the Education and Culture Committee inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children, and thank them for their invitation to provide evidence. We sincerely hope the following will be useful for the Committee in its considerations.

The Forum offers a national network and support service for everyone trying to improve outcomes for young people leaving care, including young people themselves.

Young people tell us that frequent placement moves, the stigma of being in care and worries about their situation and their future all make it harder for them to do well at school. Please see below some comments and quotes we've gathered from young people across Scotland who we've worked with this year.

The Forum particularly welcomes the fact that the Committee is looking not just at school attainment but at the longer term prospects for young people leaving care, their access to employment, further or higher education, training or voluntary work after leaving school. This sustained longer term focus is vital to young people's success, and is the natural perspective of a parent.

As society changes, it is a real inequality when the average young person in Scotland now leaves home at age 24, while most young people are still leaving care aged just 16, with less resources and support, and no way back.

The things that disrupt looked after young people's progress at school [unstable living arrangements, anxiety about the future, stigma, poor mental health] get worse when they leave care, and are compounded by poverty and loneliness. These are huge barriers, at such a vital stage for young people's educational attainment and future.

For example Children's Rights Officers from across Scotland are reporting a rise in young care leavers being put into unsuitable Bed and Breakfast accommodation, reversing gains made after the Sweet 16? Report by the Children's Commissioner called for this to be stopped.

The human and financial costs of the failure to support young people leaving care are huge, though disguised by being scattered across departments, agencies, local and national budgets, children's and adults budgets.

Investing in these young people's success would be preventative spending on so many fronts—homelessness, addiction, criminal justice, mental health, unemployment—and would certainly support greater educational attainment.
The Forum welcomes the broader moves to reform the public sector proposed by the Christie Commission, including preventative spending, integrated service provision, outcome based budgeting and co-design with service users.

We are currently working with three local authorities to help them co-design their leaving care services with the young people who use them, and promoting the “one stop shop” for care leavers that Perth & Kinross have developed by co-locating their services.

Looked after young people are uniquely reliant on public services, their collective “corporate parent”. Their fate will be a true and serious test of public service improvement and should be an urgent priority for the Christie reforms.

The legal, moral, and financial case to better support our most vulnerable young people when they leave care is clear and underpins the aim of improving their educational attainment.

We hope this inquiry by the Education and Culture Committee can bring fresh impetus and raise expectations. Thank you for the chance to contribute our thoughts on the wider and deeper changes needed to see any significant improvement, which we hope are of interest alongside the comments from young people we offer below:

The following is a collection of quotes and comments from young people we have worked with over this year (2011), from across Scotland and relates to their experiences and opinions of formal education.

**Frequent placement moves** leads to changes of school and additional hurdles including settling in, making new friends/missing old friends, building relationships with staff. ‘Moving schools all the time is making it difficult for me to finish my exams’

**New placements far from school** long distance to travel ‘this made it really difficult to get to school as I had to get up so early and get two buses’

**Difficulty focusing on school**, Additional worries - Familial issues and tensions/missing parents, siblings, family members. Building or not building relationships with carers, settling in to new placements, taking time to feel settled and at home. One young person tells us about his ‘stuff being stolen’ in residential unit.

**Lack of stability and consistency** ‘We have too many changes of social workers, you get to know one and they leave’ ‘Stop moving young people about so much, this is not good for us’

**Stigma of being in care from teaching staff** young people describe being ‘treated differently by teachers’ and how important it can be when teachers recognise the wider context of what is going on for young people and give them ‘extra support/flexibility’
**Stigma of being in care from peer group** young people tell us about feelings of ‘embarrassment about being in care’ feeling personally and being told by their peers that they ‘must have been bad and that is why they are in care’ ‘not being able to invite friends to stay over as living in residential unit’ ‘not being able to close my bedroom door when my boyfriend came round’ ‘not being able to stay over at friends’ houses without checks being done on their parents. ‘Being taken out of class for panel meetings and folk asking me where I was going’.

**Lack of control** professionals frequently making decisions on behalf of young people, feelings of lack of control over life can make it hard for young people to engage with education.

**Care Culture** ‘There should be encouragement to stay in care for longer – young people leave too soon’ ‘We feel we are expected to leave care at 16 – this is too young, we should be able to stay in care past 18’ ‘Have higher expectations of us – put more emphasis on our education’