At the 21 May evidence session for the Education (Scotland) Bill, my colleague Scott Wood undertook to return to you with further information on the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the broader package of measures the Scottish Government is taking forward, in support of raising attainment and reducing inequalities of outcome. I am writing to you now, to provide that information.

The First Minister launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge in Dundee in February to bring a greater sense of urgency and priority for everyone involved in Scottish education to relentlessly focus efforts on narrowing the gap, at all levels, in all sectors and in all parts of Scotland. The Challenge has three components: developing and expanding universal support for all schools and councils in Scotland, the £100m Attainment Scotland Fund, and the National Improvement Framework which will support the Challenge by giving us the data and evidence we need to ensure that every child can achieve the high standards set out within Curriculum for Excellence.

The universal support element of the Challenge builds on existing initiatives and programmes that are focussed on reducing the attainment gap and which are available in all areas of Scotland. These include the Early Years Collaborative and Raising Attainment for All programme; providing Attainment Advisors in every council area; the P1-3 Read, Write, Count campaign; the £1.5 million Access to Education Fund; supporting teachers to raise standards in teaching and learning through implementing Teaching Scotland’s Future and establishing the Scottish College of Educational Leadership; expanding eligibility for Education Maintenance Allowances; and Developing the Young Workforce – Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy.

The Attainment Advisors will work with councils to support and co-ordinate appropriate interventions based on available evidence of pupil progress and achievement. They will help build the capacity of practitioners and leaders to undertake self-evaluation and to plan effectively to support continuous improvement. Education Scotland will work closely with councils to ensure that this approach supports work already underway locally to raise attainment and will support the Attainment Advisors to work across council boundaries, encouraging sharing of best practice on a broader scale.

The Attainment Scotland Fund is a targeted initiative over four years, with £20m allocated for 2015-16, focused on supporting pupils in the councils with the highest concentrations of deprivation. Initially, seven councils have been identified to participate in the Fund, on the basis of the proportion of primary aged pupils who live in the most deprived SIMD quintile. We are now working with them to identify their priorities for action and will allocate resources on the basis of their proposals. Ministers have been clear that we will work with other councils to identify and respond to areas where there are pockets of severe deprivation as the programme progresses, so the Attainment Scotland Fund will support more than just the seven councils announced so far.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge is intended to help all councils and schools consider how better to use their existing resources to support pupils from more deprived backgrounds. Some initiatives and programmes, such as the Developing Young Workforce programme and Access to Education Fund, do provide additional funding at school or council level or to individuals, whilst others provide support in the form of advice, guidance or staff development programmes.
Councils spent over £4.8 billion on the provision of education in 2013/14, of which just under £3.8 billion was on primary and secondary education. The new duty proposed in the Education (Scotland) Bill is framed to require that education authorities have due regard to the desirability of reducing inequalities of outcome through the delivery of education. It does not demand that education authorities spend more money than at present. Indeed, in their 2014 report on school education, the Accounts Commission specifically stated that “spending more money on education does not guarantee better pupil performance.” Rather, the Bill requires that when allocating resources, priority is given to narrowing the attainment gap.

The Accounts Commission highlighted that councils should be targeting resources to improve educational achievement; and identified the need for stronger strategic planning, focusing on the most important priorities for improvement. It is this that we are seeking to achieve through the attainment duty.

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee in its consideration of the Bill.

Yours sincerely,

Kit Wyeth
Head of Strategy & Performance Unit