Dear Bill

Thank you for your attendance at the Education and Skills Committee today. The Official Report of the meeting will be published tomorrow and I will ensure a link is sent to your office.

During the meeting you indicated that you would provide the Committee with additional information on a couple of topics:

- Information on the structure of the senior phase and how this is affecting pupil choice, particularly whether pupils are able to take three sciences in the same year at National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher levels; and
- Education Scotland’s current information and forecasts for inspections and the number of inspectors. (NB - the Committee would wish to highlight in asking this, that whilst it appreciates the projections for inspections is subject to constant change, the numbers raised in committee today were verified by Education Scotland last Thursday)

The Committee also agreed that I ask for your comments on a number of further issues.

Members raised a fundamental issue raised at the start in relation to who is responsible for Curriculum for Excellence which led on to a discussion of your role vis a vis the CforE management board and also SQA. A further explanation or setting out of the detail of your position in relation to this would be appreciated.

Education Scotland’s submission refers to an annual zero-based approach; in evidence Education Scotland clarified that some funding is allocated to programmes which will run for longer than one year; and in response to the delivery plan, you stated that budgets were re-profiled. The Committee would be grateful if you could clarify Education Scotland’s approach to budgeting. In addition, I understood from
your evidence that that the in-year budget revisions are to take forward Scottish Government policy priorities, particularly in providing grants, and it would be helpful to understand how the revisions are planned within your budget and what, if any, impact they have on your core business and priority programmes.

In relation to the combined role of Education Scotland in developing the curriculum and delivering inspections, you were clear in evidence that you reject suggestions of a conflict of interest. The Committee would appreciate it if you could reflect further on questions raised in relation to dividing budgets between the two distinct roles and also the need, when issuing curriculum related advice to schools, to be aware of the impact of sending this information under the auspices of the Chief Inspector element of your role.

The Committee understands that one of the central functions of Education Scotland is to gather data and evidence to inform policy. Some members expressed surprise therefore that Education Scotland does not have marshalled and clear evidence, either quantitative or qualitative, in particular on the effectiveness of Curriculum for Excellence.

In addition, some members were surprised at what appeared to be a lack of awareness of the specifics of the narrowing effect on subject choices available in the senior phase. Members would be interested in your views on whether there are any equalities considerations in relation to the availability of courses at different schools, including looking at the narrowing of choices according to differing socio-economic characteristics of areas schools are in, or at schools of differing sizes.

Finally, the Committee would appreciate additional information from you in relation to the new IT systems referred to at the start of the session, in particular its intended function, projected costs, efficiency savings and delivery date.

Additional written evidence or perspective on the above issues, to inform the evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary on 21st December, would be very much appreciated. Therefore I would be grateful for a response to the specific points mentioned in the Committee session and listed by 14 December 2016. I appreciate this is a challenging deadline so if you have any questions about this letter please feel free to contact Ned Sharrat, one of the clerks to the Committee on 0131 348 5204.

Yours sincerely

JAMES DORNAN MSP
CONVENER