In response to the report submitted to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee there has been a call for evidence - a first point would be to highlight that the evidence required to take fully consider the proposals in the report is not currently available.

In general, the proposals are sensible and cover a broad range of the levers which would be expected to increase the levels of immigration to Scotland but without clear information on the levels and nature of current immigration there is a risk that the wrong measures from the presented selection of more than 20 may be chosen.

We would welcome a reliable source of robust data, as currently, information on immigration comes from the Census (question 7 “What is your country of birth?” and question 8 “If you were not born in the UK, when did you most recently arrive to live here?”). Due to the frequency and time lapse in reporting, this data is outdated. We did use the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) 2004-2011 which provided some information, but this recorded the intentions of immigrants and not where they settled and how long for.

We also welcome the fact that the report identifies that countries with successful immigration policies work to ensure that migrants have support to integrate fully in the communities in which they settle.

As a local authority we have anecdotal evidence from relationships with local businesses about the numbers of workers who originate outside of Scotland, the impact of their leaving and the risk to businesses of having to find alternative staff to take up the same activity.

This information matches up with the suggestions within the report about the specific sectors most at risk, namely food processing, hospitality and tourism at the lower skill end of the market and chemical sciences and high-value manufacturing at the other.

One of the most pressing concerns identified by businesses locally has been around uncertainty and the impact this has on future planning both with regards to investment and workforce decisions.

A survey carried out by Falkirk Council shortly after the EU referendum showed that businesses were worried about the uncertainty but were not significantly changing their investment or staffing plans within the short term as there was no clarity about what the referendum result would mean in practice. However, what was clear was that the longer there was uncertainty, the more this would weigh on confidence and that with regards to business planning and confidence levels, clarity was equally as important as the eventual direction taken.
This area’s activity in chemical sciences and high-value manufacturing is closely linked to activity which is either spun out from or supported academically by HE and FE institutions – the report is light on the approach to addressing the impact of a deficit of inward academic immigration.

If free movement is to end in 2019, any differentiated programme should focus on Scotland’s most significant local trading partners and with regards to immigration, partner countries with the lowest barriers to entry should be prioritised such as the Republic of Ireland and countries within the North Sea region – potentially with the bi-lateral agreements referred to in the report.

Whether or not a differentiated approach is to be followed, several of the soft levers set out could be implemented regardless to improve Scotland’s attractiveness as a location for inward migration and as set out, twinned with the effort to deliver inward investment.

The impact of the soft levers will however be constrained if not matched with the support of some of the firmer levers and will stop entirely at the point where they meet arbitrary UK-wide immigration caps and limits on where workers can and cannot travel from to contribute to the Scottish economy.

The report sets out a number of measures which are predicated on the premise that greater levels of decentralisation will allow for greater definition and clarity in policy decision making however even where decision making is devolved, many of these measures, such as setting a more relaxed immigration cap level in Scotland, may be difficult to implement due to the lack of a way to prevent immigration to Scotland ‘leaking’ into the rest of the UK and no desire to set up any barriers to this.

Overall the report clearly sets out the options available to Scotland but as above, very few of the actions can happen or hope to have any great impact in isolation – the levels of integration between Scotland’s economy and the rest of the UK would point to the fact that a suitable solution for Scotland can only come from a mix of Scottish and UK-wide policy measures.