Dear Aileen

Thank you for providing the Committee with a written update on our inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care. The note was very helpful in informing our subsequent discussions in committee.

It is reassuring to hear the Scottish Government’s ongoing commitment to improving the lives of some of Scotland’s most disadvantaged children. We, of course, fully share this agenda and are determined to play our role in ensuring better outcomes are delivered.

It is for this reason the Committee agreed I should write to you, to encourage further progress to be made and to ensure that all of the many initiatives underway deliver tangible improvement.

The Committee would welcome regular updates from the Scottish Government on the work being undertaken across public bodies to support looked after children. We are flexible as to the frequency of these updates but propose that, as an initial response, the Scottish Government’s forthcoming Looked After Children Strategy would provide the type of comprehensive overview we seek. I should stress that the Committee is particularly interested in high level findings and evidence on outcomes, rather than detailed descriptions of particular initiatives.

At Tuesday’s committee meeting we requested from officials further information on a range of issues, which I have set out in the accompanying annexe. The annexe covers various other matters, including some recommendations from the Committee’s report on which we seek additional information from the Scottish Government.
We would welcome a response to all these points and are content to receive this alongside the Strategy. This will allow the Committee to consider its future approach to scrutiny in this area. We fully appreciate the Scottish Government’s limited role in providing interventions ‘on the ground’ and would therefore be agreeable to receiving a joint response from the Scottish Government and any other relevant bodies.

On a separate note, I would like to request an update on the Scottish Government’s kinship care financial review. The Committee’s report on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill committed to return to this issue and we also have an outstanding related petition to consider. For the purpose of planning our work programme it would therefore be very helpful to know how the review is progressing.

Yours sincerely

STEWART MAXWELL MSP
CONVENER
Annexe

This annexe lists various issues on which the Committee would welcome further information. Many of these issues should be placed in the context of the ongoing reforms being carried out by the Scottish Government and other organisations.

- please explain how the reforms are being coordinated and how they were designed to provide value for money;

- how would you assess the reforms’ success in terms of improving service providers’ ability to plan for the future balance of care? In responding, you may wish to take account of three recommendations in the Committee’s report paraphrased below—
  - Recommendation 34: the likely service delivery and financial implications of fewer children becoming looked after in the longer term;
  - Recommendation 39: whether current resources for assisting children ‘falling through the gaps’ are adequate;
  - Recommendation 139: the support and investment that may be required for children looked after at home.

- the Scottish Government has made clear its key goal of achieving earlier permanence. What consideration has been given to setting targets for looked after children to achieve better life chances, such as improved educational attainment and better health and employment prospects?

- the Scottish Government’s most recent submission discusses the work of the ‘Children’s Hearing Improvement Partnership’ and lists the bodies involved. What role is to be given to children and young people with care experience in this and in all other relevant work?

At the Committee’s meeting various offers were made to provide further information. These are summarised below. The Official Report can be found here: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9456&mode=pdf

- an update on data collection and improvement;
- the reason for the downturn in looked after children’s tariff scores and positive destinations;
- the proportion of looked-after children across all local authorities who have access to independent advocacy; and a general update on developing advocacy policy;
- an update on guidance on sibling contact;
- with reference to the Scottish Government’s response to recommendation 67 of the Committee’s report, how our concerns about social work staffing, retention and training have been “taken forward within the appropriate contexts”.
• CELCIS raised an issue around leadership in its written evidence on which we would welcome your response:
  o “… few Scottish local authorities or Community Planning Partnerships have introduced these assessments [population wide assessments of need and wellbeing], and where they have different tools have been used. In order for Scotland to develop a robust national picture of the development and wellbeing of its child population, we urge the Scottish Government to mandate a single assessment tool … without central direction and robust leadership they will not deliver the benefits they promise.”

• Finally, and as noted, we seek additional information on the following recommendations in our report—
  
  o **Paragraph 63:** We are very concerned by the claim that post-qualification training may be “disappearing”, as this would exacerbate the other challenges facing social workers that we have highlighted. The Scottish Government should therefore provide detailed information on the impact of the local government settlement on social workers’ post-qualification training and career development, and their ability to support children and families. If the evidence substantiates the claims made by the Scottish Association of Social Work, the Scottish Government should confirm what action it will take to reverse, or at least mitigate, these impacts.

  o **Paragraph 84:** We are very concerned to hear that some of the most vulnerable people [i.e. parents with learning disabilities] in society consider they are being discriminated against by having their children removed disproportionately more often. Further research is necessary to determine the true scale of the problem, and we call on all parties to work together on this. We welcome the commitment by SCRA and the Scottish Government to make further improvements and expect that these will also be made in full consultation with representative groups. We believe that the Scottish Government should evaluate the merits of the supported parenting approach.