Introduction

1. The Education and Culture Committee is conducting an inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children. In order to inform its final report to the Parliament, which is scheduled to be published in early 2012, the Committee has requested a chamber debate on the main issues to have emerged from the inquiry.

2. The remit of the Committee's inquiry is: to consider the reasons why more significant progress has not been made since devolution in improving the educational attainment of looked after children and what can be done to address this.

3. The Committee agreed to conduct this inquiry as it was aware of Scottish Government statistics showing that, in addition to fewer qualifications, looked after children tend to have poorer school attendance records, higher rates of school exclusion and are less likely to go onto employment, further or higher education, training or voluntary work after leaving school.

4. All the evidence received in connection with the inquiry is available on the Committee’s webpage, along with a detailed SPICE briefing on relevant policies and guidance in this area since devolution, and a note of the Committee's fact-finding visit to schools in Glasgow.

5. In order to inform other members’ contribution to the chamber debate, the Committee has agreed to publish this summary of the evidence received during the inquiry.

Key themes

6. The Committee has grouped together some of the key issues from the evidence under the following broad headings—
   - readiness to learn
   - support at school
   - implementation of policy and legislation
   - joint working
   - resources.

7. These headings are explored in more detail below.
Theme 1: Readiness to learn

8. Although the Committee’s inquiry is focussed on educational attainment, much of the evidence considered the support that needs to be in place before a child or young person can engage with school learning. This heading sets out some of these issues, including: tackling underlying deprivation and poverty; placement instability; early intervention; and, better support for children who are looked after at home.

9. Some relevant points raised in evidence are as follows—

- Fife Council argued that children are ready to learn when they are emotionally stable, with secure attachments to key care givers, are free of threat and risk, attend school on a regular and consistent basis and are supported by key role models who value education and actively support learning;
- The Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) told the Committee that it is: “challenging to work on early literacy if there are huge issues around substance misuse, domestic violence or parents’ own literacy levels”;
- Various witnesses discussed the high levels of need amongst children and young people who are not ‘looked after’ and advocated early intervention prior to children becoming ‘looked after’;
- Education Scotland highlighted a useful distinction between early intervention to prevent problems occurring in the first place and intervention to reduce the impact of existing problems;
- There was a recognition amongst service providers that attainment levels were particularly poor for those children who are looked after at home and that better support was needed for such children and their parents;
- Suggestions made to the Committee included involving the voluntary sector more, using foster carers as role models, expanding family centres and using “para-professionals” or social work assistants;
- While it was recognised that providing support to parents to help them engage with school was important, the challenges of doing so were acknowledged.

Theme 2: Support at school

10. The Committee heard evidence about issues that can hamper a child’s attainment at school, for example, attendance, exclusion, the part-time curriculum and the importance of having a key individual to whom a looked after pupil can turn for support. Some relevant points raised in evidence are as follows—

- There is a difference of opinion about whether the main issue in respect of the educational attainment of looked after children is the level of attendance at school or the number of exclusions from school. The Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) argued that the major issue is exclusion whilst others, such as CELCIS and the Association of
Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), emphasised the importance of attendance, stressing in particular the poor attendance of children looked after at home;

- ADES argued that a multi-agency approach towards promoting attendance would contribute to improving attainment;
- The Committee heard evidence from CELCIS and ADES that some pupils, while not excluded, received only a part-time curriculum;
- The Committee discussed the role of the Designated Senior Manager (DSM) in some depth. CELCIS described the role as being “pivotal”. Education Scotland agreed that this role was important but warned against the dangers of taking a “tick box” approach;
- The role of the DSM appears to have been implemented differently in different schools. Education Scotland suggested that the guidance on the role could be simplified, while the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS) stated that DSMs had other roles, and that schools also had child protection co-ordinators, staff development co-ordinators, heads of year, principal teachers in curriculum and a range of other roles;
- Education Scotland also stated that, rather than having an individual with a particular job title, young people needed someone who they felt cared about them in school;
- The Committee heard from ADSW and ADES that a focus on looked after children’s attainment is too narrow and that examination results at 16 are not the only way of measuring achievement. On the other hand, organisations such as Barnardo’s emphasised the need to increase aspirations and expectations;
- The Committee heard evidence that many of the issues around the educational attainment of looked after children are also relevant to many children who have additional support needs but who are not looked after.
- On the Committee’s fact finding visit to schools in Glasgow the Committee heard that the role of school counsellor was useful because it allowed pupils to talk to someone who had no official role in enforcing attendance.

Theme 3: Implementation of policy and legislation

11. The Committee noted at the outset of its inquiry that there had been a considerable amount of relevant policy, legislation and guidance in the area of looked after children since devolution. There has been some evidence to suggest that this material is complex, or that it is not always implemented consistently at a local level.

12. Some relevant points raised in evidence are as follows—

- Much of the evidence has suggested that existing policy and legislation is right, but that it is complex and can lack coherence. The EIS argued that there is a case for simplification. In relation to “Getting it Right for Every Child” (GIRFEC), Additional Support for Learning (ASL) and Care Regulations, Fife Council argued that it was time to “rationalise and simplify these processes nationally”;
• Some evidence suggested that there are perceived conflicts between GIRFEC and ASL. However, Education Scotland made clear that ASL and GIRFEC are supportive of each other, not contradictory, if implemented properly;
• Some witnesses called for stronger leadership from the Scottish Government, local government and individual schools. For example, the Scottish Children’s Services Coalition (SCSC) said that: “Where local authorities and successive Scottish administrations have fallen short is largely on agreeing how best to implement these policies and ultimately how they will be financed”. ADSW considered that there was no long-term vision for the educational attainment of looked after children;
• When asked about “patchy implementation”, COSLA told the Committee that policy implementation would always be variable.

Theme 4: Joint working

13. A recurring theme in the evidence was the need for better joint working between the agencies that have a responsibility for looked after children. Some relevant points raised in evidence are as follows—

• The Committee heard that effective “joined up working” was not always happening, but that it was an essential part of improving outcomes for looked after children;
• Fife Council’s written evidence stated that “Improvement will only come about as the result of sustained and targeted evidence based multi-agency intervention”;
• The Committee heard from various witnesses that there was a need to challenge existing attitudes and cultures, which would require strong leadership and staff training. For example, Barnardo’s stated that the level of leadership and commitment in schools was highly variable. CELCIS and ADSW emphasised the importance of teacher behaviours and the head teacher’s attitude to joined up working. The Care Inspectorate and ADSW considered that effective joint working also required good relationships between staff;
• It was noted by the Care Inspectorate that different targets and different priorities between agencies could also inhibit joint working;
• The Committee received a considerable amount of evidence suggesting that it would be helpful for teachers to be trained in issues relating to looked after children, particularly in relation to dealing with attachment, trauma and how to make an assessment;
• Evidence was also received suggesting that further training was required for social workers to improve their knowledge of schools and the importance of GIRFEC principles;
• A number of submissions referred to barriers created by bureaucracy and IT. For example, concern was expressed by the EIS that confidentiality issues inhibit forwarding information. However, Education Scotland advised that, apart from health issues, there were no data protection issues that should prevent sharing of information.
Theme 5: Resources

14. The Committee heard evidence that lack of resources, in terms of time, staff capacity and money can act as a barrier to joint working, as a barrier to providing learning support and can make it more difficult to ensure stable placements. Some relevant points raised in evidence are as follows—

- The Committee heard more evidence about a lack of time and capacity than it did about lack of finances, although these are all linked. For example, CELCIS referred to staff being very busy and suggested that education staff do not have the time to be heavily involved in care planning (Official Report, col 436)
- The Committee also heard some suggestions for changing resource allocations. For example, the EIS suggested that school staffing formulae ought to be weighted according to the number of looked after children in the school, while Children 1st suggested that budgets should be pooled. ADSW suggested that every authority should have a dedicated looked after children teaching and health resource and that all residential units should have a link education officer or teacher. UNISON argued that all local authorities should have enough support for learning staff.