Dear Stewart

Inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care

Thank you for your letter of 14 August 2014 following the committee's work to look at the progress made in relation to recommendations within your inquiry report on the decision making on whether to take children into care. I apologise for the delay in getting this response to you but it has taken time to compile the detail which I hope will be of most use to the committee.

The Scottish Government would be happy to provide the Committee with regular updates and where it would be beneficial we will be happy to work with stakeholders to provide a collaborative response. I note that you are flexible as to the frequency of these updates and I would propose that our officials liaise with each other about timescales that would best suit both of our work plans.

As my official Mr David Blair mentioned at your meeting on 12 August, we are taking forward work on a Looked After Children Strategy. We are taking a collaborative approach to developing the Strategy, working with stakeholders to ensure that it reflects a shared vision and commitment to improve outcomes for children and young people. As part of our collaborative approach we held a stakeholder event on 13 November that focused on outcomes, shared priorities and commitments and how we create the right conditions for success. The learning and feedback from this event will further inform the development of the Strategy, which will also encompass our plans for enriching our data collection with regards our looked after children population. We will share this work with you soon. I am also pleased to provide you with further details of our activity set out against the recommendations and questions you asked in your letter which I have included in the Annex.
Separate from this inquiry, you also asked for an update on the Scottish Government's kinship care financial review. I can inform you that the financial review has been delayed in light of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's investigation into local authority policies on payments to kinship carers and foster carers.

The Draft Budget for 2015/16 published on 9 October outlined additional funding for tackling child poverty including working with COSLA to extend financial support to kinship carers so that they can give children the best start in life. The Scottish Government is working closely with COSLA and Social Work Scotland about this and we expect to make an announcement as soon as possible. We will write to the Committee about this separately.

I would like to thank the Committee for your continuing interest in this work and for taking responsibility for ensuring that better outcomes are delivered for our looked after children.
Placed in the context of the on-going 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.

The Scottish Government believes that the best way of managing improvements is to design the governance arrangements to suit the particular nature of each programme. Our approach to Joint Strategic Commissioning, modernising the Children’s Hearings System, and the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme are governed in different ways in order to best support their particular needs. The Looked After Children Strategy will provide further overarching narrative on this.

The Joint Strategic Commissioning Programme – Realigning Children’s Services (RCS) will have at its heart the desire to create value for money for children’s services. By providing a comprehensive picture regarding children’s needs, combined with indicators of service provision, Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) are able to ascertain whether in their area services are provided to those children who need them most. Alongside that, RCS will ask CPPs to chart all available children’s services in their area with associated cost to provide an understanding around potential overlap or gaps in service provision. An evaluation will be built into RCS, to measure the actual impact of the programme and identify improvements to be made throughout the programme’s lifetime to ensure that the programme itself represents value for money. A Learning Network will be set up for all participating CPPs to maximise benefits from each experience.

The modernised Children’s Hearings System was commenced on 24 June 2013. Since then, the Children’s Hearings Reform Implementation Programme Board has had responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 and associated practice changes. Given that the majority of provisions in the 2011 Act have now been commenced, the final meeting of the Implementation Programme Board took place on 4 September 2014.

The Scottish Government’s Children’s Hearings Team will ensure that the few outstanding elements of the reform programme are delivered in consultation with the multi-agency Children’s Hearings Improvement Partnership (CHIP) and relevant agencies as appropriate.

The PACE programme takes a whole system approach involving local authorities, Children’s Hearings and the Courts. Instead of having a separate governance structure, each PACE area is governed locally and reports on improvements are shared with CHIP, which has representatives at a national level from Social Work Scotland, the Scottish Court Service, Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) and Children’s Hearings Scotland. This ensures that progress with and the future development of PACE is considered in the context of other developments and reforms and that learning can be shared.
PACE is designed to provide value for money both in the way it is delivered and in the improvements it aims to make to deliver permanence more quickly and effectively. It is being delivered using existing resources in CELCIS, the Scottish Government and local partnerships – no additional funding is being provided to local partnerships. It is about identifying and testing small scale improvements within existing systems that can be scaled up rather than “add on” activities that may not be sustainable once the programme has ended. By enabling children to achieve permanence more quickly PACE aims to free up resources in social work and children’s hearings. I have attached separately a copy of the interim review of activity, outputs, and progress of the PACE programme for your information.

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.**

If the reforms underway are successful, in future years we might expect the balance of care to reflect a greater proportion of children in kinship care and foster care and fewer in higher tariff placements like residential care. We would expect more children to be supported in families outwith the care system – sometimes referred to as being ‘on the edge’ of care. This would include children cared for by a kinship carer who holds a kinship care order. We might also expect that there would be fewer children overall in the formal care system following a determined focus on securing early permanence and reducing the numbers of children on long term supervision.

Any such shift would be gradual in nature. Our approach to supporting local authorities to manage the realignment of children’s services more closely to needs will be through our Joint Strategic Commissioning programme. The RCS programme helps local areas identify local need through population based surveys and to analyse and identify required services, before commissioning them in partnership with local providers. The approach is ‘sector neutral’ and thus offers scope for existing and new organisations to work with community planning partners (who will have in house services) to reach agreement over the appropriate mix of services. This approach will help community planning partners better understand what they need to plan for the medium term and reinforce the benefits of a collaborative approach with neighbouring partnerships, where scale and costs are important considerations. By providing the right services at point of need crisis interventions are likely to be fewer in number and severity (and cost) and the knock-on effect is to reduce the ongoing cost of providing public services.

**Recommendation 39: whether current resources for assisting children ‘falling through the gaps’ are adequate.**

As Mr Blair explained to the Committee at your meeting in August and set out earlier in this letter, we are working on a Looked After Children Strategy that covers the scope of our work across early intervention, permanence and improving the quality of care. The Strategy will promote an approach that has at its core a focus on working in partnership across systems and a commitment to improvement and listening to the voices of children and young people. We are continuing to engage with stakeholders on the strategy and most recently at the event on 13 November and will share this work with the committee soon.
Ultimately, it is the responsibility of local authorities and CPPs to ensure that the resourcing of supporting children and families is managed appropriately. The RCS programme being set up by the Scottish Government seeks evidence on the wellbeing needs of children and this information will be used to shape service provision for those CPPs taking part. This work will help improve local planning and supports the duty placed on local areas under Part 3 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to plan for children’s services. The RCS programme is a step change in the scale of data gathering and its systematic use to re-design public services and tighten the safety net protecting and supporting vulnerable children and families. On a day to day basis, the Named Person, as set out in Part 4 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, means every child and young person has someone to go to for help and advice, and who holds the full picture of concerns so that their wellbeing can be assessed in a holistic way. The Named Person is able to call on other services for support if it is needed. If the child or young person requires a targeted intervention to support their wellbeing, then a co-ordinated planning process through the Child’s Plan set out in Part 5, will be initiated. This will help ensure that no child who needs it is left without support, and that concerns are identified and addressed as early as possible.

The Scottish Government has confirmed it will fully fund councils with £10 million over 2 years for 2015-17 to implement the Named Person provisions. We will then work with COSLA to monitor resources needed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing also announced on 18 June 2014 additional investment of £41.6m over the next four years to create 500 new health visitors. This is to help fulfill the Scottish Government’s vision for early years services, for which the Early Years Framework, Early Years Collaborative and Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) are key.

The Scottish Government will continue to be receptive to new ideas raised by the sector, our young people and their families to make our systems better still for those who are vulnerable and may need support.

Recommendation 139: the support and investment that may be required for children looked after at home.

The Scottish Government know that this group of children are most likely to be excluded from school and have the lowest educational attainment tariffs and this is a particular area where the required services for children looked after at home need to be improved. This is why the Scottish Government will be developing a National Mentoring scheme, starting with children looked after at home from age 8-14 aimed at providing extra support to assist these children and young people in realising their full potential. Other recent improvements that will affect children looked after at home include the introduction of the GIRFEC duties within the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (expected to commence in August 2016) and the annual report required by section 181 of the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 (the ‘Feedback Loop’). As each child who is looked after at home will have a Named Person who will plan what is required from universal services this will improve the current position. Service providers will therefore be able to identify areas where additional support and investment may be required to ensure all children have an equal chance.
Children who are looked after at home are a diverse group and there is no one size fits all solution to their needs. Some children may be on home supervision while very young, while others will become looked after at home for the first time as teenagers. As Mr Blair indicated, we have begun to mine the data we hold on children who are looked after at home in order to understand more about the experiences of this group and how we can best meet their needs. We are also looking at whether there are particular aspects of home supervision that would benefit from more in-depth research.

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 considers that there are other approaches to delivering better outcomes for looked after children that are likely to be more effective than setting targets.

The Early Years Collaborative is a method of generating sustainable improvement without setting targets. It has identified key changes that, if implemented for every child, every time, will bring transformational change. These are:

- Early intervention in pregnancy;
- Attachment and child development;
- Continuity of care in transitions;
- 27-30 month review;
- Developing parent skills;
- Family engagement to support learning;
- Income maximisation / tackling child poverty.

CPPs are focusing their testing in these areas. We anticipate that improvement in some if not all of these areas will be important in improving outcomes.

Across a number of areas of the Scottish Government we have adopted an approach of working with local partners to use improvement methodology to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. This is the approach we are taking with our Early Years Collaborative, with the Raising Attainment for All programme and with the PACE programme. As part of improvement methodology, partners identify stretch aims which are most relevant to what they need to improve. The concept of a stretch aim is that it should be challenging and should not be achievable by hard work alone but should involve a shift in the way that activity is delivered. It is used to focus and drive improvement rather than to hold people accountable for meeting or not meeting a target.

We consider that this approach allows partners to focus on how to improve, motivates partners and allows aims to be focused on local improvement needs. We think this is a more productive approach than setting targets.
The Scottish Government’s most recent submission discusses the work of the ‘Children’s Hearings 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?

The Children’s Hearings Improvement Partnership (CHIP) is looking at actions to further strengthen the child’s ability to participate in a hearing and related procedures, as required by the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011. Although this work is in its early stages, it is intended that care experienced children and young people will be involved at all relevant stages.

Young people and children will also be invited to participate at the appropriate stages in relevant initiatives being taken forward by the CHIP’s working groups.

Scottish Ministers now involve care experienced children and young people in the Board member appointments of relevant agencies, including the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA). Children and young people have also been involved at relevant stages in the development of the 2011 Act and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. They have, and will continue to be, involved in the development of supporting guidance in relation to these Acts.

Children and young people are also involved in relevant work of the SCRA and Children’s Hearings Scotland (CHS). For example, the SCRA’s modern apprentices programme looks to apply the knowledge of children and young people, who have experience of the care system, in the design and communication of measures to improve children’s experience of the Hearings System. They are also involved in relevant research undertaken by these agencies, for example, the recent CHS research paper, Views & Experiences of the Children’s Hearings System: [http://www.chscotland.gov.uk/our-publications/research/2014/07/views-and-experiences-of-the-childrens-hearings-system/](http://www.chscotland.gov.uk/our-publications/research/2014/07/views-and-experiences-of-the-childrens-hearings-system/)

The introduction of statutory duties for Corporate Parenting in April 2015 has also generated new thinking by corporate parents across the public sector about how they might involve looked after children and young people and care leavers in the delivery of services, and for example, some are looking at how to provide work experience and employment opportunities in their organisations.

What are the reasons for the downturn in looked after children’s tariff scores and positive destinations.

On 21 August we issued a news release to publicise that there was a misallocation of data for children between the ‘full year’ and ‘part year’ categories in the June publication Education Outcomes for Scotland’s Looked After Children 2012/13 statistics. Changes have been made to both the main and additional tables and the updated Statistics Publication is available on our website. These corrections altered the publication significantly.
Average tariff scores for 2012/13 are comparable to 2011/12 but compared to 2009/10, average tariff scores for children looked after for a full year have increased by almost 50 points, compared to an increase of 35 points for all children. In fact, the number of children looked after in one placement for the full year who sustain a positive destination is now 74%. For all children looked after for the full year, there has been a one per cent increase in positive destinations, which is comparable to the change in the overall population. In addition, rates of school attendance continue to improve more quickly for looked after children than for all children. Although rates of exclusion remain much higher for looked after children, they also continue to improve more quickly for looked after children than for all children.

The Scottish Government’s educational outcomes data collection procedure has improved over recent years which gives us individualised data for almost two-thirds of looked after children and young people with the intention that this will continue to increase further. We have also made improvements to the presentation of the data to make it more accessible and we will continue to work with users to ensure the content is most appropriate for their use. We know that the use of tariff scores means that looked after children and young people are consistently seen to underperform. There is a specific piece of work underway to reform tariff scores. This provides the opportunity to ensure looked after children and young people are not disadvantaged by the way we calculate tariffs. We will publish more details about our data review shortly.

While we work to improve the quality of our data and what we understand by it, we remain committed to doing more. It is important that we continue to support and resource a variety of arrangements, including some innovative schemes that are already making a difference for looked-after children such as the mentoring projects being pioneered by Glasgow City Council. This kind of creative approach has inspired us to offer funding support to that Glasgow project and to take forward work to develop a National Mentoring Scheme, which I have mentioned to the Committee previously.

The proportion of looked-after children across all local authorities who have access to independent advocacy; and a general update on developing advocacy policy.

The Scottish Government does not hold central information on the numbers of looked after children across all local authorities who have access currently to independent advocacy services. Work has been undertaken by the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) to map the availability of advocacy services across local authority areas. The most recent mapping exercise, which was undertaken in 2013-14, can be accessed at: http://www.siaa.org.uk/advocacy-map-launched/

The SIAA is drafting guidance for independent advocates working with children and young people. This work has been developed in consultation with advocacy organisations and key stakeholders and the SIAA will publish this work shortly.

The Scottish Government considers there to be a ‘spectrum of participation’ which encompasses all those involved in ensuring that the voice of individual looked after children and young people, as well as looked after and care experienced children and young people as a population group, is being fully heard in all relevant settings and contexts.
Individual looked after children and young people may both be able, and choose, to self-advocate within the children's hearing, education and health systems, as well as across the specific range of other looked after children information sharing, decision making and reviewing forums which inform their individual care and support plans. Other individual looked after children and young people, who feel less able to articulate their views, may choose to identify a trusted adult within their life who they wish, and who is able, to support them to self-advocate or to advocate on their behalf within these settings. These adults may come from a variety of sources, including: their immediate or extended family; a volunteer mentor or befriender; or a paid professional with whom they have a close relationship.

While for some others, who identify a need for support to express their views, there may not be a trusted adult they are able to identify. For the Scottish Government, it is these children and young people who will most require additional support and for whom there may be a need for short-term professional advocacy, although there are recognised to be difficulties and drawbacks in introducing another unknown adult, for a short period, into the life of a looked after child or young person. Research among those with care experience has consistently highlighted the difficulties and impact of the number of adults who are transient in the lives of looked after children and young people and identified the need for a consistent trusted adult to share their care journey.

It is this recognition which shapes the Scottish Government's plans to ensure that all looked after children and young people will have access to an open-ended relationship with a trusted adult, who will remain alongside them for as long as they choose. We aim to deliver this through the development of a National Mentoring Scheme, initially focussing on those children and young people, aged between 8-14 years, who are looked after at home.

We are adopting a Scottish approach to the challenge of improving outcomes for our looked after children and young people through the development of the National Mentoring Scheme. This means focusing on the strengths in individuals, communities and systems, and building on these collaboratively to bring about improvement. For example, the first stage of development has been to ascertain the extent of current provision across Scotland. Initial indications have identified a wealth of third sector community based projects across Scotland that offer individual support to looked after children and young people and care leavers across all 32 Scottish Local authority areas.

Regardless of how these projects are described (Mentoring, Befriending, Advocacy) most share common key features. These include developing a relationship to support the child or young person to identify and set goals, develop self-advocacy skills and promote their active participation in processes they are involved in. This also involves advocating on behalf of the child or young person when necessary.

As these projects and organisations mentioned above do not primarily identify as providing 'advocacy' services they are not captured by the (SIAA) bi-annual mapping exercise. They are, however, members of either The Scottish Mentoring Network or of Befriending Networks Scotland, and it is important to acknowledge the overlapping role of such schemes and the significant benefits they offer.

Section 122 of the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 relates to access to advocacy services for children and young people attending Children's Hearings. This section has not been commenced to date.
Scottish Government officials have undertaken discussions with relevant partners to scope out a range of models and to consider possible future options for advocacy services for children in the modernised children’s Hearings System. The Scottish Government’s Children’s Hearings Team is now looking to establish practical information about how advocacy services might be commissioned and delivered to support the child’s participation in the hearing and potential levels of take-up. It is considered that a focused action research project in an appropriate local authority area would help with this and would, in time, inform considerations in relation to the provision of advocacy services for eligible children across Scotland.

A key consideration in this work is the need to ensure that the provision of advocacy is integrated appropriately with the wider measures available to promote and facilitate the child’s participation at a hearing. The proposed study will, therefore, align with the work of the Children’s Hearings Improvement Partnership (CHIP), which is looking at actions to further strengthen the child’s ability to participate in a hearing and related procedures, as required by the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011.

Ministers have also stated previously that they will consider the wider provision of independent advocacy for children within the Hearings System when they are satisfied that such services can be suitably designed and sustainably resourced.

More generally, we are committed to taking steps to increase the quality, consistency and availability of advocacy support for all children and young people including looked after children.

In December 2013, we published the Independent Advocacy, Guide for Commissioners Including Principles and Standards for Independent Advocacy. In June 2014, we supplemented this guide with an online resource developed with partners in the advocacy field offering straightforward guidance for anyone who advocates for children and young people.

Provide an update on guidance on sibling contact.

The Scottish Government has put together a working group of relevant stakeholders in order to create national guidance on Contact. Group members include representatives from Who Cares? Scotland and Clan Childlaw to cover sibling contact. A first draft of the guidance has been prepared and following revisions from group members as well as comments sought from stakeholders' outwith the working group, a final version of the guidance will be ready for publication in June 2015.
CELCIS raised an issue around leadership in its written evidence on which we would welcome your response: "... few Scottish local authorities or Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) 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."

We agree with the suggestion by CELCIS that the Scottish Government takes a central role in this. That insight is reflected in the way the Scottish Government is currently setting up RCS. The Scottish Government is putting together a comprehensive package of tools to implement wellbeing and needs assessment, training and facilitation to help create the right conditions and governance arrangements for decisive change and improvement, which we would like to test with CPPs during the coming year. By taking a strong leadership role in identifying what data is collected and issuing strong quality assurance on the epidemiological surveys procured via the Scottish Government, we can make sure that the evidence can have multiple usages including mandatory outcomes reporting as a result of part III of the CYPA 2014 and be comparable across Scotland.

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".

In evidence to the Committee, the Scottish Association of Social Work raised a number of points about social work staffing, retention and training. Our discussions with SASW have identified that their evidence for this has been largely anecdotal to date. One key aspect which may be of interest to the Committee is that the recent Workforce Data report published by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) on 30 September 2014 shows that in 2013 the number of social workers had actually increased and the largest increase in staffing in any of the sub-groups is in Children's [social work] fieldwork services.

However, as previously noted, my officials have raised the topic with the key stakeholders who have a role in gathering and understanding the evidence in this area. These include COSLA, Social Work Scotland, the Care Inspectorate, the Scottish Social Services Council and SASW itself.

In terms of training availability and uptake we are also in discussion with post-qualifying providers. We are initially looking at the evidence in sources such as Care Inspectorate inspection reports, the SSSC workforce data reports and reports being produced for the SSSC-led review of the social work degree. For the first time this year, the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser to the Scottish Government will be undertaking an analysis of the local authority Chief Social Work Officer Annual Reports which should provide additional evidence. The workforce is also one of the action strands being considered by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum which I chair and this may recommend specific research activity to better understand the position and, if necessary, identify mitigating actions. The Committee's concerns have therefore been taken forward in a range of contexts with the partners who have more direct responsibilities in this area. We share the Committee's evident interest in ensuring that this very valuable workforce is maintained, supported and developed, as evidenced by the resource we provide to our NDPB (the Scottish Social Services Council) and to other relevant organisations - and we will continue to work with partners on this topic.
The answer to recommendation 63 below explains the work being taken forward for social work post-qualifications training and career development.

You also asked for additional information on the following recommendations in your report -

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.

As noted in the answer to recommendation 67 we are working with partners to better understand the position on this topic in order to identify, if required, any mitigating actions and how these will be taken forward. As the Committee will be aware thorough evidence provided by the SSSC, there is also specific work (initiated in late 2013/early 2014) being undertaken to consider the whole approach to the education of social workers in Scotland. This includes a review of the Social Work Degree (whether undertaken through the under-graduate or post-graduate route) and work to develop a post qualifying framework. The two aspects are of course linked and any recommended changes will require time to be worked through. However, I hope that the Committee will be reassured by the fact that work is progressing on this area. It is being led by the Scottish Social Services Council. Examples of the work which will feed into this review include a recently completed report – *Post Qualifying Social Work Learning and Development in Scotland: An Overview*. Discussions have also taken place with universities and employers on issues such as recruitment, retention, different types of role requirements, recognition and accreditation of existing training and experience are just some of the areas that will have to be taken into account in the development of the framework. Any framework will take into account the differing levels of experience from newly qualified to senior management roles.

The review of the Social Work degree is to consider not only if it is still fit for purpose, but also the future needs of the sector in light of current policy changes and imperatives. Work undertaken to date on the review includes research and, engagement with the sector through an 'Ideas Platform' and visits made to the 32 local authorities to discuss the issues. Initial outcomes of this work include reports on:

- *Mapping the Standards in Social Work Education against the revised National Occupational Standards*;
- *Readiness for Practice of Newly Qualified Social Workers*;
- *Findings from First Line managers on readiness of Newly Qualified Social Workers*.

Further reports will be compiled covering the responses received by the SSSC via the 'Ideas Platform' which sought views from anyone with an interest in social work. A short life working group with membership from the sector, educational establishments, frontline workers, students and representatives of users and carers has been set up. The group has met twice to date with five more meetings planned. The group will pull together the issues identified in the reports, identify common and priority themes, pursue further consultation, if required, and prepare a final report on the way forward and recommendations. The timescale for publication of the final report is March 2015.
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.

The Keys to Life has the human rights of people with learning disabilities at its heart and recommends that all public bodies involved in providing support to people with learning disabilities ensure that people with learning disabilities are treated equally and their rights upheld.

The Keys to Life the learning disability strategy recognises that there are gaps in the local service provision of supported parenting services and that the good practice is patchy in local authorities. In an effort to address this the Scottish Good Practice Guidelines for Supporting Parents with Learning Disabilities is being refreshed and will be relaunched early in 2015 to encourage professionals working with parents with learning disabilities to follow the guidelines to enable better outcomes for families.

It is recognised that early identification of parents in need of support can lead to better outcomes for families where the parents have learning disabilities. The Scottish Government is committed to working in partnership with the relevant statutory bodies and third sector organisations in the sharing of best practice. We hope this will eventually lead to improved practices throughout Scotland that lead to better outcomes for families.

Our work in this area reflects the general need to support practitioners to make fair and balanced decisions about how to support parents with learning disabilities. Currently there is no national data on the parents of children who become looked after. However, I am not content that we know enough about this issue and in the first instance I have asked officials to discuss options with relevant bodies including Social Work Scotland the possibility of commissioning a short piece of work to gather more evidence. I will be happy to update the committee on this in due course.