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Inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care

I would like to thank you and all members of the Committee for your extensive Inquiry and for your on-going consideration of issues affecting looked after children and care leavers. I appreciate your understanding in allowing this response to be submitted slightly later than anticipated.

As you are aware from my response to your Interim Report, the Scottish Government is committed to improving the life outcomes of all children and young people. In cases of family breakdown we need to be absolutely clear about how we work together to support children, families and communities by ensuring the decision making processes and actions are proportionate, appropriate and timely.

There are some encouraging signs that outcomes are improving gradually across almost all indicators. GIRFEC principles make a difference to the success of interventions, especially where the child's views are taken seriously and acted upon. But on its own earlier and more frequent interventions can result in more children coming into care – in particular becoming looked after at home where the challenges around improving outcomes for this group are well rehearsed. Therefore, the partner policy aim here is *early permanence*. Both early intervention and early permanence are needed to meet our aims of reducing the number of children on long term supervision requirements and increasing the numbers finding secure legal permanence. Focusing on these two areas in the years ahead, and through the shared actions set out in this response, will lead to a system of intervention and substitute care that wraps around the child and is effective, affordable and swift.

The Children and Young People Bill contains measures which will strengthen support for looked after children, young people and care leavers, and which have relevance to the issues raised in the Committee's Inquiry. Last week during the Stage 1 debate of the Children and Young People Bill I set out the five principles of the Bill.

Firstly, this Bill will establish in statute our **shared responsibility** for ensuring that our children have the best start in life and access to what they need to succeed as they grow and develop. Secondly, that shared responsibility should be achieved by working with parents and carers to **make public services more responsive** to needs and sensitive to working with families. The third principle is acknowledging that we must **continue to improve** how we support our most vulnerable children and young people; the challenge addressed through this Inquiry. The fourth principle is that services to support our children and young people are better where they are **planned jointly**. Children need services that work together with each other and work together with their families. Lastly, this is a Bill entirely underpinned by the principle of **early intervention**.

The benefits afforded to children and families by providing support as soon as problems arise justify early intervention. It is essential that all children experience a safe, stable, nurturing and permanent home. However, the Committee is aware from its evidence of the complex legal environment governing this area of policy which – rightly – makes simplistic solutions to family breakdown unworkable. That is why we are committed to the early years' agenda, supporting parents and carers in the earliest stages and to ensuring that our looked after children and young people are found a permanent home quicker.

I am pleased to attach the Scottish Government response to the Inquiry Report demonstrating where the Scottish Government has and is taking a leadership role by setting a clear policy direction centred on better outcomes for children and young people. In support of that we are encouraging all sectors to work together more effectively; holding partners to account towards ensuring that we deliver excellence to all vulnerable children in Scotland.

AILEEN CAMPBELL

PART 1: HOW COULD DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES BE IMPROVED?

Theme 1: Early Intervention

Para 34. The Scottish Government should state whether early interventions will lead to fewer children becoming looked after over the longer term, and to their enjoying demonstrably better outcomes. If fewer children are likely to become looked after, the Scottish Government should provide an analysis of the service delivery and financial implications for service providers. We also consider that, in discussing early interventions or early years interventions, terminology should be used more clearly and consistently.

The Scottish Government believes that early intervention, pursued in conjunction with early permanence, can ensure that fewer children become looked after over the longer term and that those who are looked after do not remain on long term supervision. But, by definition, there may be an increase in looked after children in the short term as earlier decisions and more frequent interventions are made to improve the situation for those who need it. The trend for children becoming looked after younger indicates that social workers are acting more quickly to assess families and intervene earlier. However, there must be a balance between the legal imperative to intervene to protect a child at risk and initiating the appropriate action. By embedding key elements of GIRFEC in statute, requiring local authorities to improve permanence planning and delivery through collaborative working and shared learning we are moving towards a more consistent level of response to children and families in need.

Para 35. The Scottish Government should explain how the trend for increasingly younger children becoming looked after is compatible with legal requirements around promoting the upbringing of children by their families. This is particularly relevant in the case of babies who may be removed close to birth.

Early intervention to remove children from their families is not just about earlier decision making; it must be underpinned by high quality support for families, based on the best evidence about what works, and robust assessment using evidence-based tools. Where this kind of support is given - and assessment indicates that parents are still not able to provide the nurturing home children deserve - we believe that social workers are right to take early decisions about children becoming looked after. We know from our work with the sector such as through Practice Exchange Workshops delivered by CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland), that social workers are increasingly feeling confident about making use of relevant evidence from previous interventions with families to hasten timescales for subsequent children. We support this approach. Data showing that children are coming into care at younger ages is a positive development as it provides earlier opportunities to work with families before difficulties become entrenched or repeated.

Para 39. The Scottish Government, given its role in helping to set the policy and resource framework, and relevant service providers must take steps to ensure that the complementary skills of staff in universal services and in social work are used more effectively. We are very concerned to avoid children ‘falling through the gaps’, in the manner outlined, and call on the Scottish Government and service providers to clarify whether current resources for assisting such children are adequate.

We take our role in helping service providers to set the policy and resource framework very seriously. The Concordat with Local Government, which remains a cornerstone of our approach to government in Scotland, is a hallmark of our approach to public service reform; building on the findings of the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services.

A strong direction was set out in the outcome of Spending Review 2011 to drive forward that agenda to improve outcomes, tackle inequality and create public services shaped around the needs of local people and places.

We are fully committed to the approach which focuses public service attention on prevention rather than cure; encourages greater use of evidence to prioritise and deliver performance improvements; and empowers and develops people across public services to make full use of the assets, skills and knowledge they have in order to achieve better outcomes. For example, Scottish Government policy leads are working with the Permanence and Care Team (PaCT) at CELCIS to support local authorities to improve assessment and decision-making and remove drift and delay in securing permanence for looked after children. Over the coming months the Scottish Government will also issue practice notes about aspects of permanence to support improvement and good practice.

Our programme of work to encourage strategic commissioning is also aiming to maximise the use of universal services and social work through supporting community planning partners to analyse need in their areas and develop the services that will encourage early intervention to meet those needs. Funded by the Directorate for Children and Families and managed by the Joint Improvement Team (JIT) based in the Directorate for Health and Social Care Integration, the programme has a number of work strands which are designed to support a long term improvement in the capacity of local partnerships to understand needs, plan services and shift resources in order to be able to invest in evidence-based intervention programmes and deliver better outcomes for children.

The work will include two major initiatives to develop our understanding of the profile of child populations in selected local partnership areas and to develop a tool to enable partnerships to understand the financial implications of the services that are provided for children and young people. In addition, work will be progressed to address the significant cultural and workforce issues associated with effecting change across complex, multi-sectoral organisations and partnership bodies. The work will be rolled out in a number of local areas at one time; all of which will receive hands-on support from staff based in the JIT. This initiative follows from longstanding concerns voiced by the Public Audit Committee (2010) and the recommendations both from the National Residential Child Care Initiative (2009) and LACSIG Strategic Commissioning Hub (2012).

Looking to the immediate future, by early 2014, we will publish a Care and Permanence Strategy, which is described more fully in Part 2, which is entirely focused on reducing the number of older children who spend year after year in care. Next week at the final Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group meeting I will announce my intention to set up a Permanence Leaders Group to help the sector improve how it delivers speedier permanence for vulnerable children. We will invite leaders from the key organisations involved in delivering permanence for children to join this group. The group will co-ordinate work around permanence and address issues which we know prevent effective interactions between the different systems.

Theme 2: Assessments

Para 50. It is important that all parts of the decision-making processes have a better understanding of each other's roles, so that this inefficiency is addressed and the burden on social workers is reduced. We note the Scottish Government's work on the interactions between child support processes and the court system. We hope this work will fully address this issue and call on the Scottish Government to provide clear timescales over which progress will be made.

We are working with CELCIS on mapping the (“child pathway”) processes and numerous decision makers who may have a role from initial non-statutory intervention to achieving permanence. This is a crucial and practical step towards identifying barriers to efficient decision making and I would be happy to write to the Committee as this work develops. The concept of the child pathway is central to the forthcoming Care and Permanence Strategy referred to previously.

When giving evidence to the Committee Professor Eileen Munro commented on the importance of ensuring the focus should be on the child, rather than strict timescales. We are cognisant of the fact that strict timescales laid down in legislation may not be in the best interests of every child. We do, however, believe it is important that local authorities monitor timescales in order to prevent drift and delay. As a result of the Bill we will be updating Looked After Children guidance to clearly set out best practice timescales for action. We want to promote parallel planning, where local authorities start to plan for potential permanence at the same time as working with families towards reunification. This does not prejudice the outcome but it does mean that if reunification is not possible a plan is already in place to help ensure the child has a permanent home as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, practical steps have also been taken to develop the shared learning principle into a series of innovative permanence events delivered by CELCIS. This allowed the sheriffs and panel members who attended to raise awareness of their roles in decision making. This will be further realised through the Scottish Government's recently announced Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme which will work in two specific local authority pathfinder areas to work together across all stakeholder agencies to make improvements in early intervention and early permanence decision making. This work will feature as part of an improvement knowledge hub, and good practice examples and practice notes will be available via the Scottish Government website. There will also be a national forum offering opportunities for professionals to come together and share good practice and learning.

Para 51. We are concerned that social workers consider there are factors that impede their ability to work with children and families as well as they would like. Therefore, we also call on the Scottish Government, given its role in setting the policy and resource framework, to explain how it will work with local authorities to help child social work carry out its role more effectively.

It is a matter of public record that the Scottish Government's approach to improving the quality of children's social services centres on the needs of the child and unambiguous support given to professionals to make good judgements and to continuously learn from what works. Getting It Right for Every Child enshrines this principle and by introducing this model into statute we are putting the force of law behind our support to social workers – and indeed other professionals responsible for promoting the wellbeing of children and young people.

On a practical level the Scottish Government supports children's social work in numerous ways and some clear examples are set out in my response to the committee's question at paragraph 39.

I articulated my genuine commitment to ensuring that children achieve early permanence and preventing, as far as possible, children and young people remaining on long term supervision. I welcome the support offered by many of those who gave evidence during this Inquiry including Stella Everingham from Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) who noted the real steps forward achieved through GIRFEC. I see this as further evidence that GIRFEC gives social workers the tools they need to conduct credible risk-assessments

and provides a powerful opportunity to deliver real improvement for our looked after children and young people.

Para 53. If there is clear evidence that tangible and cost-effective improvements are being delivered, the Scottish Government should explain how it will encourage the roll-out of such initiatives across the country.

The Scottish Government is aware of and meets its responsibility in relation to setting the policy and resource framework in Scotland. Part of our role is to ensure that the system is designed to be – *and is* – challenged. I entirely agree that part of the solution to identifying barriers and delays lies in sharing learning from initiatives such as the PACE programme and ensuring that local learning can inform national policy making and delivery. We spend upwards of £3.9m a year on CELCIS, IRISS and WithScotland who work collaboratively with the sector precisely to share ‘what works’, connecting research with practice, exchanging knowledge and ideas and coordinating activities across different organisations is worthwhile. Their efforts have led and continue to drive incremental sustainable improvements throughout the sector.

Theme 3: Workforce training and retention

Para 58. We agree that the Scottish Government, given its role in helping to set the policy framework, and relevant service providers should ensure that all those who could benefit from joint training are able to do so.

Para 63. 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 the Committee recognises, it is for service providers as responsible employers to ensure that they support all their staff by providing high quality training, and on-going supervision and development to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to undertake their work. The Scottish Government also invests in and supports developments aimed at strengthening the social work workforce and building their competence and confidence. These developments are supported primarily through the work of our public body, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) who currently work with a range of partners, for example NHS Education Scotland, on reviewing qualifications and taking forward joint workforce development activity. We also direct resource to a number of centres of excellence for social services, including CELCIS and to support the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) and the work of the Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW).

Para 64. The social work degree is being reviewed by the Scottish Social Services Council. This review must address all the concerns around consistency and assessments that we have heard throughout our inquiry. In particular, it should ensure that prospective social workers are fully aware of criticisms voiced by young people with experience of the care system.

The SSSC review of the social work degree will cover, amongst other issues, selection of students wishing to train as social workers, development of key skills e.g. undertaking complex assessments, critical decision making and ability to apply academic learning to a range of challenging practice circumstances. However, the review will not provide the whole

solution. Universities on their own cannot produce newly qualified workers who are fully-formed professionals. It is vital that employers play their part in providing good quality placements to students, supporting newly qualified workers and facilitating continued professional development. As has been the case since the introduction of the social work degree, service users and carers will continue to be involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of degree courses.

The review of the degree will also form part of the SSSC's work to develop a national learning strategy for social service practitioners which will include an accredited framework for learning at qualifying and post-qualifying levels.

Para 67. We note that workforce issues were addressed in Changing Lives: the 21st century social work review. The continued concerns about staff retention and training that have been highlighted to us suggest that previous policy interventions have not resolved these issues. The Scottish Government, in conjunction with local government, must establish the current levels of staff retention in children's social work and the causes of these retention levels. All necessary measures must be taken to ensure that staff retention is significantly improved.

The Changing Lives Review concluded that 'social workers are highly valued and increasingly relevant to the changing needs of society'. The Scottish Government has set out in Guidance the Role of the Chief Social Work Officer, the Role of the Registered Social Worker in Statutory Interventions and the Practice Governance Framework: Responsibility and Accountability in Social Work Practice. However it is for employers and practitioners to assess on a local basis the necessary roles and structures, levels of responsibility and accountability.

Responsibility for delivering social work services and supporting social worker training and career development lies with Local Authorities. It is for them to assess on a local basis the necessary staff roles and structures and support these with appropriate staff development within the parameters we have set for regulation and development of this workforce. We do have regular dialogue with key partners in the social work sector, for example through a recently established Social Work Services Strategic Forum and regular meetings with the Association of Directors of Social Work. We will, therefore, make sure that the issues noted by the Committee in regard to staffing levels, retention and training are considered and taken forward within the appropriate contexts.

I also note the Committee's intention to return to the benefits to be offered by the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 and associated reforms. The new arrangements are now operating across Scotland and, while the new system will require time to establish itself fully, the Act and supporting secondary legislation signify a real opportunity for improvements and will go some way towards responding to challenges posed by the Inquiry.

Theme 4: Hearing all voices in the decision-making processes

Para 84. We are very concerned to hear that some of the most vulnerable people 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.

While the best interests and wellbeing of the child are always the paramount concern, it is of fundamental importance that other family members' rights are also acknowledged and respected in processes and decision-making. In 2012 the Scottish University Insight Institute (SUII) funded the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) and partners (including Scottish Government) to develop a series of knowledge exchange workshops around Getting it Right for Looked After Disabled Children and Young People. These workshops brought together academics, policy makers, service practitioners, third sector organisations and service user organisations to discuss and debate the key issues on this topic.

This programme raised the profile of looked after disabled children across policy, research and practice and has generated considerable interest and energy in developing further work in this area. CELCIS have since organised further events to consider what barriers exist to achieving permanence for disabled children and young people.

As part of our Manifesto commitments, we set up a Child Protection and Disabilities Ministerial Working Group to consider options for establishing practical supports that child protection practitioners might need to better help children in families affected by disability. This will primarily focus on disabled children and young people, but will also consider the needs of children and young people in families where disability affects a parent, carer or sibling. I can update the Committee when the Group sets out its recommendations in early 2014.

In the meantime there is on-going work by the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA)/ Children's Hearings Scotland Individual Participation in Hearings Group, including discussions with the Scottish Consortium on Learning Disabilities and People First (Scotland) towards making Children's Hearings easier to understand for those with special needs and finding ways to improve their participation. The wider work of the Individual Participation in Hearings Group has made considerable progress in reviewing, modernising and replacing information material designed by and for young people, the development of new too, and practice to better enable young people to contribute to decision making in the Hearing room. The recently established inter-agency Children's Hearings Improvement Partnership will focus on ensuring the voice of children and young people is more consistently heard in these key proceedings.

The Scottish Government places great importance on seeking the views of all stakeholders as we continue to develop the policies that will deliver the very best for our children, young people and families. This is particularly true of the Bill process to date where we have received advice and views from some 2,400 children and young people and 1,500 parents. A range of opinions were expressed about the entire care journey; mostly based on personal experience. As a result of that perspective, these discussions have been constructive and probing. Such insight ensures that developing policies are examined, improved and deliver the desired positive impact for our children and young people.

PART 2: OUTCOMES OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Para 95. There is a demand for more detailed information to be collected that would provide a fuller picture of looked after children's outcomes, and allow for judgement to be made on whether interventions have been successful. Taking into account its response to our interim report, we recommend that the Scottish Government progress this work as a matter of priority, to ensure that the Minister's desire for a "better, more rounded picture of a looked-after child's wellbeing" is achieved. In doing so, the Scottish Government should provide a detailed explanation of how improvement will be determined, i.e. the baselines we are starting from and the outcomes that are expected.

Para 96. In oral evidence, the Minister described 'tangible progress' in terms of adoptions from care doubling; and large increases in the proportion of younger children becoming looked after. The Scottish Government should state whether these are to be considered positive outcomes for the whole child protection system. If so, it should explain how this aim will influence the different decision-making processes.

The Inquiry has highlighted again that there is a need for more detailed information to be collected and for the data we do collect to be analysed in a way that informs practitioners and policy makers' future strategies. The Scottish Government is currently working to review Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) data in order to ensure that we focus more clearly on outcomes when publishing data on looked after children. The review is due to be completed by the end of the year and should contribute towards our understanding of the service delivery and help us to articulate and anticipate financial implications for service providers. We will come back to the Committee on the issue of measuring outcomes once we have considered the findings of the review.

The Care and Permanence Strategy mentioned above will consider the whole child protection system. To achieve this requires support for community planning partners to analyse needs in their areas and develop the services that will support early intervention and meet those needs and the CLAS review will help underpin statistically this work.

Para 100. In light of its role to make local practitioners fully informed and empowered, the Scottish Government should build on existing efforts and work with partners to ensure that key lessons from existing research are better disseminated and, crucially, acted upon. It is up to individual organisations to commission and publish research as they see fit. While this is perfectly reasonable, the Scottish Government should work closer together with other bodies to identify outstanding gaps in research knowledge and to commission further research accordingly.

In addition to the work of CELCIS, IRISS and WithScotland mentioned above Children's Hearings Scotland is currently working with partners including the Scottish Government, the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration, the Care Inspectorate and Association of Directors of Social Work on a feedback loop, which will provide panel members with a picture of how hearing decisions are implemented by local authorities. The National Convener will consider the feedback provided during this consultation and by mid-February 2014 will publish the final suite of indicators and counting rules, which local authorities will be asked to collect from 1 August 2014. CHS will then produce a report in late 2015 which will help inform future panel member decision making and achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

In addition, the Committee will be aware of WithScotland established in 2011 with Scottish Government funding to support child protection practice, policy and research. WithScotland resulted from the convergence of The Multi-Agency Resource Service (MARS) and the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network (SCCPN). Both were set up in response to the Inspection into the Care and Protection of children in Eilean Siar. The report recommended the establishment of a multi-agency resource on which all staff in Scotland working with complex child protection issues can draw for advice, expertise, training and research. Now jointly funded by the Scottish Government, local authorities and public sector partners in health and police, they offer a valuable service to broker access to relevant knowledge and expertise.

Para 110. We recognise that the Scottish Government has already undertaken work on a 'whole family' approach. There are clear views, however, that this approach could be extended. The Scottish Government must build on work with service providers to ensure that support for families is better coordinated, so that outcomes are improved. This should include an evaluation of any further resources that would be required.

Achieving early permanence is about quick decision making to achieve safer outcomes, arrived at via sustainable, fair processes. We recognise it requires earlier appropriate support for families, good planning, well trained social workers who feel supported in decision making, legal processes that put child welfare and development at their heart and support for carers.

This sits at the heart of the principles underpinning the Bill and components of these have been explored in more detail above. In addition, and in support of the Bill provisions, will be a wealth of guidance, which will be developed in collaboration with partners offering real opportunities to build on existing knowledge, evaluate and improve practice supporting local authorities to improve permanence planning and deliver excellence for all our vulnerable young people.

Para 111. There are parents in Scotland whose use of alcohol and drugs affects their children. Policy aimed at such parents must not undermine efforts to support their children. We therefore call on the Scottish Government to provide an assurance that alcohol and drugs policy always takes children's rights into account.

Children affected by parental substance misuse are a particularly vulnerable group of children. For that reason, the Scottish Government has been pursuing a range of initiatives to ensure their needs receive dedicated support. This includes recently revising 'Getting Our Priorities Right' - guidance for professionals on how to support these children - and developing and disseminating a new risk assessment tool for identifying child protection concerns, not least in families where these issues are a concern. In addition, in 2014, a joint event will be held to bring Child Protection Committee and Alcohol and Drug Partnerships together to improve the strategic and operational links at local level.

The underlying policies reflect the deep recognition of ensuring that the rights of children should be mainstreamed into both child protection and alcohol and drugs policies. This will be further strengthened by proposals in the Children and Young People Bill for Ministers to take full account of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their decisions and for them and public bodies to report on what they are doing to advance those rights.

Para 118. We welcome the work on permanence being carried out by CELCIS, SCRA, the Scottish Government and various others. The Care Inspectorate also has a fundamental role to play in helping to bring about improvement in this area. The Scottish Government should confirm how all this work is being coordinated to ensure that relevant agencies will deliver tangible and measurable improvements to looked after children.

Para 119. While some benefits will arise over the longer term, we expect improvements in permanence planning to be evident in care inspections relatively soon. The Scottish Government should explain how all local authorities are to benefit from CELCIS work and whether extra support is likely to be provided to ensure all authorities make progress in achieving permanence.

In the last year CELCIS have been working collaboratively with 20 local authorities towards the Scottish Government's desire to achieve systematic and strategic change in the planning of placements. The aim of the project is to reduce unnecessary drift in the care planning process; supporting children to meet developmental milestones and long term outcomes. Future activity includes working with a sub-group of these already engaged local authorities to explore what works in achieving permanency for looked after children in foster care. I would be happy to ensure the Committee receives more information and in lieu of that I would highlight the feedback we have received from those involved to date who have applauded the collaborative approach enabling invaluable sharing of expertise in meeting challenges.

Para 122. The Scottish Government should clarify its position on the appropriateness of long term supervision orders. If it is seeking to minimise their use, then it should set out a clear strategy for doing so.

At present too many children spend too long (more than two years) on supervision and there needs to be a greater focus on achieving permanence for these children. In reflecting on the Committee findings we have identified a need to develop a Care and Permanence Strategy and review the first Scottish Government Care and Permanence Plan which was published in 2011. The Strategy will be published in early 2014 providing the strategic framework for the work in the Care and Permanence Plan and ensuring that we are giving clear messages to stakeholders about our approach to permanence. It will recognise that far reaching improvements in delivering early permanence for children can only be made by taking a whole system approach to improvement, involving all those who contribute to the permanence process – social work and wider community planning partnerships, Children's Hearings and the Courts.

Para 128. The damage that can be caused to a child by parental neglect or abuse is very well established. It is simply appalling that many children are removed from the parental home but then go on to suffer further abuse or neglect when they return home. This is despite the fact that the factors behind a successful reunification are apparently well known to decision makers. The Scottish Government must take a lead in encouraging service providers to make significant improvement in this area.

Given the huge and long term impact on children's life chances that delays can have, we do not believe that repeated unsuccessful attempts at reunification over long periods of time are in a child's best interest. We do believe that parents have the right to early and effective support to enable them to address issues and successfully care for their children. This is why we have included measures for Named Person and family counselling in the Children and Young People Bill. We believe that the balance between parental rights and faster permanence is best served by early and effective support and evidence based assessment

and that this will allow confident and timely decision-making. Neither children nor parents benefit from drift and delay.

Para 135. The Scottish Government has made it clear that work on understanding spend and future demand can best be undertaken at a local level. We question how this fits with the Scottish Government's leadership role, and how it will allow for a national picture of future spending and placement needs to be established. Given the Scottish Government's role in presenting the annual Draft Budget to the Parliament we also consider that it should have a role in determining whether value for money is being provided at a national level. Given the Scottish Government's position, however, we invite its response to the concerns expressed about strategic commissioning. We also consider that all the ongoing reviews mentioned throughout this report should take into account value for money and effective use of resources.

I have set out the Scottish Government's plans in this area in paragraph 39 on page 4. We are fully committed to focusing public service attention on prevention rather than cure through greater use of evidence to prioritise and deliver efficient services. However we must allow these strategies time to gain ground and achieve the desired culture change and concomitant improvements while demonstrating value for money.

Para 139. If the ongoing work concludes that more support is necessary for children looked after at home, then the Scottish Government, in conjunction with local authorities, should provide detailed information on the investment that would be required. In particular, we require clarification of whether increased social work support would be available, an issue we have raised on various occasions. The Scottish Government should also provide a detailed description of the improvements that all the reform activity in this area is expected to deliver.

Earlier this year I hosted 2 summits to address the challenges faced by children looked after at home. These summits brought together leaders from all professions and focused on sharing best practise and improving outcomes for this vulnerable group of children and young people. As a result of these summits, participants pledged to use improvement methodology to address a specific area of practice within their work place, and as a follow up there will be regional forums to share knowledge gained and further develop best practice.

I have also previously set out our ambitions towards improving planning, decision making and resourcing across the sector. As part of these plans, a wide stakeholder engagement process is in progress ensuring that we involve health, education, social work, the children's hearing system and courts in striving to make things better for our looked after children and to ensure earlier and appropriate decision making. In addition, the PACE programme, which I referenced earlier, will continue to encourage collaborative working and good practice notes will be available via the Scottish Government website in due course along with the new national forum.

We are currently undertaking research work with SCRA to look at decision making within the children's hearing system for looked after children at home and have plans to commission further research once these findings have been analysed. Again, I would be happy to make sure the Committee receives updates on this work in due course if having more detailed information it would be of interest.

Also, as part of our wider engagement with stakeholders on improving planning and decision making, the Scottish Government is currently working with the sector on producing a practice note for all practitioners involved in supporting children and their families where they are looked after at home.

Finally, the Committee is aware that CELCIS recently published a report which was commissioned as a result of the inquiry into looked after children's educational outcomes. During that inquiry you urged the Scottish Government to consider utilising volunteers more in response to the needs of looked after children and young people, particularly those looked after at home. Responding to these recommendations, we established the LACSIG Mentoring Hub in late 2012 to explore options for a national mentoring scheme. Independent consultant Dr Susan Elsley chaired the Hub which came to a number of high level conclusions, namely recommending a national mentoring scheme aimed at 8 – 14 year olds across Scotland who are looked after at home. Dr Elsley will be presenting her Report and recommendations at a LACSIG event on 3 December and the Scottish Government response will issue shortly afterwards.

Para 146. In short, there is a need for a clearer vision to be established, around which staff, resources and processes may have to be rearranged. The Scottish Government should therefore provide clear leadership by explaining how, bearing in mind the discussion above, current decision-making processes could be more closely aligned towards achieving greater consistency in outcomes for looked after children.

Getting It Right for Every Child is the policy and strategic framework overlaying our approach to all children in need or at risk. There are a range of interactions between concerned agencies - some of those have to be robust to legal scrutiny and challenge - but what should unite them is the fundamental belief that every child has the right to expect the best start in life.

The Scottish Government, officials and partners from throughout the sector are looking closely at the potential pathways for children and young people across the children's hearings system, permanence and adoption and child protection. We are asking the right questions of ourselves, and of others. If particular consideration or actions aren't making things better for our young people, then we need to change it or stop it.

We are legislating to embed key elements of GIRFEC in statute and introduce a raft of new measures through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. We will be critically reviewing with partners the current approaches to make sure that they are all directed at securing better outcomes for children and young people. We envisage a continuum of interventions (and non-interventions), with proportionate scrutiny and safeguards, that deliver apt responses to all children, young people and families in need or at risk.