

Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson Foghlaim agus Ionnsachadh Fad-bheatha
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning
Angela Constance MSP



Stewart Maxwell MSP
Convenor
Education and Culture Committee
The Scottish Parliament
EDINBURGH
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Dear Convenor

Thank you for your letter dated 13 May 2015, in which you invited the Scottish Government's views on the initial evidence collated by the Education and Culture Committee on the education attainment gap in Scotland. I very much welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's priorities and actions below.

Tackling inequality is at the heart of the Scottish Government's agenda so that every child can succeed in school and gain the skills they need for life. As set out within the *Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland: Our Approach 2014-17*, our ultimate aim is to break inter-generational cycles of poverty, inequality and deprivation and we are working collaboratively with our partners in local government, health, the third sector, parents, industry and many others to deliver these aims. This does not require starting from a blank sheet. We have a firm foundation in our key policies: Curriculum for Excellence (CfE); Getting it Right for Every Child; the Early Years Framework; Teaching Scotland's Future; the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006; the National Parenting Strategy, National Youth Work Strategy 2014-2019 and Developing the Young Workforce.

The First Minister launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge in Dundee in February to bring a greater sense of urgency and priority for everyone involved in Scottish education to relentlessly focus efforts on narrowing the gap, at all levels and in all sectors. The Challenge learns from and builds on approaches used in the London Challenge, but also from further afield - especially Ontario. It has three components: firstly, the £100m Attainment Scotland Fund, which I provided details of to you in my letter to the Committee of 5 March 2015, is a new, targeted initiative focused on supporting pupils in the authorities of Scotland with the highest concentrations of deprivation.

Secondly, the Government are developing new and expanding existing initiatives and programmes that are focussed on reducing the attainment gap and which are available in all areas of Scotland. These include the Early Years Collaborative and Raising Attainment for All programmes; providing Attainment Advisors in every local authority; the P1-3 Read, Write, Count campaign; the £1.5 Access to Education Fund; supporting teachers to raise standards in teaching and learning through implementing Teaching Scotland's Future and establishing the Scottish College of Educational Leadership; expanding eligibility for Education Maintenance Allowances; and Developing the Young Workforce – Scotland's Taigh Naomh Anndrais, Rathad Regent, Dùn Èideann EH1 3DG
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Youth Employment Strategy. In addition, Education Scotland are developing a National Improvement Hub with a clearly defined focus to support practitioners on raising the attainment of children and young people from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It will help build the capacity of practitioners to use evidence and systematic improvement methods to drive improvements and raise attainment. Building on the work of the School Improvement Partnership Programme, Education Scotland will also support local improvement and collaboration across local authorities.

Lastly there is the development of a National Improvement Framework, which will support the Challenge by giving us the data and evidence we need to ensure that every child can achieve the high standards set out within Curriculum for Excellence.

In addition, the Education Bill introduced to the Scottish Parliament in March brings forward a range of measures designed to bring improvements across our education system. It sends a strong signal, nationally as well as locally, of the value we place on ensuring that all our children and young people receive the best education they can and achieve their full potential and has a clear focus on narrowing the attainment gap as well as enhancing children's rights. We recognise that legislation won't deliver the changes we want to see on this by itself but it is an important part of the overall picture.

I will now respond to the Committee's specific questions and suggestions below:

1. What exactly does the Scottish Government mean when it refers to 'attainment' and 'closing the attainment gap', and what are the likely implications for all pupils of seeking to close the attainment gap? How can the definitions provided be easily understandable to pupils, parents and employers, and provide a clear direction to the education profession?

2. If attainment is measured in terms of examination results, and the attainment gap is to be narrowed, does this mean that more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will have to do significantly better in exams than other pupils? If so, how is this to be achieved?

The Scottish Government's view is that attainment denotes educational performance and the acquisition of the valuable skills, knowledge and attributes needed to succeed in life. This is currently measured by achievement in the senior phase and leaver destinations. The establishment of a National Improvement Framework will develop ways of assessing this throughout the broad general education. School level performance data, alongside supporting resources, are available for parents and carers to access through the Parentzone Scotland website.

The Government's ambition is to raise attainment for all of Scotland's children and young people and specifically to close the attainment gap between those who are most and least disadvantaged. This means a relentless focus and prioritisation of effort on supporting those who are disadvantaged and at the same time ensuring that effective support and challenge remains in place for all pupils to ensure they reach their full potential. One of the key roles schools play is to improve the life-chances and outcomes for all children whatever their background or circumstances. This is exemplified though the Government's Developing the Young Workforce programme which specifically aims to widen the range of opportunities for all young people in school to achieve work related qualifications with a specific focus on those young people who currently may be underachieving.

The Government is clear that attainment goes beyond exam results or test scores. Good attainment requires working in partnership with pupils and parents and is dependent on certain key foundations for learning; namely good literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing. Our work to raise attainment and reduce inequalities of outcome is focussed on helping all our children build solid foundations in these three crucial areas. This provides a focus which everyone in the system can understand and a direction for teachers which is in line with Curriculum for Excellence.

3. What is the Scottish Government's view on how schools' performance could most fairly and appropriately be assessed?

As part of the Programme for Government, Education Scotland will increase the focus on attainment and equity in their support and inspection of schools. This will be included within the work on the review of inspection and the development of the next edition of *How Good is our School*, shining a spotlight on the issues around attainment in our schools and beyond. This will ensure that we have a clear understanding of when, and where, outcomes are improving.

How Good is our School is used for self-evaluation, quality assurance and inspection in every school in Scotland and the new version of will be launched at the Scottish Learning Festival in September 2015. In the meantime the school inspection advice note for session 2015/16, due to be published in June, will outline our expectations for schools in improving attainment and achievement.

More work is required to help us understand how the system as a whole is performing. The development of the National Improvement Framework will provide a better understanding of children's progress, at school, local authority and national level. Although it is currently under development, the Framework over time should capture the range of learner achievements and outcomes aligned to Curriculum for Excellence, and provide a means for schools and local authorities to access and use this information to measure progress and guide improvement of their learners.

4. Notwithstanding efforts underway through *Insight*, to what extent should schools be placing even greater emphasis on pupils' achievements other than their examination results?

Achievement goes beyond examination results, relating to all aspects of a young person's planned learning. Reflection and dialogue are central to achievement, profiling and reporting and should be a continuous process for all learners from 3 to 18. Profiles should be produced at the key transition points of P7 and S3, summing up learners' progress and achievement across the curriculum, including those achievements which stem from learning experiences outwith school. In the development of the S3 profile, it is important that learning and achievement in areas that will not be taken forward into the Senior Phase are captured.

Developing the Young Workforce – Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy set out how we would implement the recommendations from the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce. We agree with that there needs to be greater value and understanding of what a rich blend of learning, including vocational education, can offer. Our implementation plans represent a fully collaborative effort with local government, with support from delivery partners and a clear plan to involve industry in education and training.

5. What impact could the successful implementation of the Wood report have on narrowing the attainment gap? Will the annual reports on the implementation of the report set out how it is contributing to narrowing the gap?

The Scottish Government have committed to annual reporting against the key performance indicators (KPIs) set out in Developing the Young Workforce – Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy. A number of those KPIs measure our efforts in raising participation and removing barriers from minority groups, a key part of our support for raising the attainment of all our young people. Data from *Insight* will inform our reporting, capturing progress in the percentage of school leavers attaining vocational qualifications.

As part of CfE and alongside the implementation of complementary policies and programmes, Developing the Young Workforce has an important role to play in both raising attainment for all and closing the attainment gap. From 3-18, work-related learning can be very motivational for children and young people, helping them to develop skills for learning, life and work, which enhances their attainment more generally. Significantly, the development of more high quality vocational pathways through the senior phase and available to all young people will help to meet the needs of a wide range of learners, including those who in the past may have been least engaged and attained more poorly at this stage.

The new Education (Scotland) Bill will place a statutory duty on SG and Councils to reduce inequalities of outcomes in schools and will include a requirement for them to report on progress on narrowing the attainment gap. This will ensure the education system focuses on the contribution which all of our activities – including Developing the Young Workforce – make to this key priority.

6. How can all relevant parties adopt a common understanding of improved vocational education and how it is to be delivered?

Under CfE, we have already moved away from a narrow academic focus, ensuring that both skills and knowledge are valued. Developing the Young Workforce complements this by providing an even greater focus on ensuring all children and young people have access to a range of high quality learning opportunities, with work related learning from age 3 onwards and the option to pursue vocational awards alongside National Qualifications in the senior phase.

The wide range of partners involved in developing and delivering Developing the Young Workforce – indicated through the membership of the National Advisory Group, National Invest in Young People Group and Programme Board – will help to ensure a fuller understanding of our joint aspirations in this respect and move the discussion away from where learning is delivered to the quality and accessibility of that learning.

Young people and those who influence and guide them in the choices they make about their learning –including their parents and teachers - must have access to high quality information about future jobs and careers, including labour market information. Skills Development Scotland works with schools, teachers and young people to provide this advice. That ensures young people are aware of the ever improving vocational offer, the rewarding career prospects it can unlock, and its relevance to them.

7. This is not the first time initiatives have been launched to improve pupils’ employability skills or raise the profile of vocational options. How have the Scottish Government and local authorities sought to apply the lessons from previous efforts?

The implementation of CfE in schools, college regionalisation and the growth of the Modern Apprenticeship programme all create a strong foundation for our efforts to develop the young workforce.

One of the key lessons is the recognition that close collaboration between schools, colleges, employers, third sector providers, parents and young people is crucial. Partnership working at a national and regional level is a key feature of Developing the Young Workforce and the implementation plan highlights ways in which these links will be developed and sustained, through for example the creation of regional industry-led groups.

8. Could there be any unintended consequences of the drive for more ‘vocational options’, such as education authorities exerting pressure on pupils to follow a vocational pathway? We recognise that personalisation and choice are entitlements in Curriculum for Excellence, which should not change.

Embedding schools-based aspects of Developing the Young Workforce within CfE and aligning associated performance measures (eg KPIs) will help prevent perverse incentives.

Schools and their partners now have the flexibility to offer a range of pathways through the Senior Phase which aim to raise the attainment levels of all their learners. Local authorities, together with their partners, will develop a balance of high quality opportunities valuing vocational education opportunities alongside routes to our well-established and internationally renowned university system. We need to make sure that young people have a range of choices available to them; that will support them in whichever route they choose, widening their options.

9. If more pupils are staying on between S4 and S6, what career guidance is being given to those not pursuing an ‘academic path’ to ensure they do not leave school with minimal qualifications?

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) works with schools and local authorities to provide careers information advice and guidance in schools. SDS will work with teachers so that career aspirations are taken into account within the curriculum in the senior phase.

Looking forward, the new Career Education Standard (3-18) will provide a basis for planning progress for learning from ages 3 -18 about the world of work and making choices on learning pathways. It sets out the expectations of teachers, parents, employers and careers advisors in helping children and young people to gain these experiences. Introducing careers education earlier in school is an important element in efforts to tackle inequality, ensuring all young people regardless of their background or circumstance are supported to pursue a career that matches their abilities and aspirations and to understand the many routes to get there. The draft Standard will be available for feedback in the near future.

10. Are some schools placing too much emphasis on university, to the detriment of some pupils? If so, what actions could the Scottish Government take as a result and what would be the possible impact on our universities?

Through CfE and Developing the Young Workforce, schools seek to develop learners skills for learning, life, and work. The aim is to provide a range of learning experiences that meets individual needs and aspirations, and to ensure a successful transition directly into work, or to further learning or training. The Scottish Government also aims to ensure that there is equality of access to university based on potential, regardless of background. This will be

driven forward by the Commission on Widening Access. The combination of these measures should help young people to follow pathways appropriate to their abilities and aspirations, rather than based on stereotypes. This will benefit young people, universities and employers alike.

11. Do you consider schools currently have the structures in place and appropriate skills mix to be able to offer more vocational options?

Schools are not expected to deliver this on their own - partnerships are crucial in widening choice for all young people in the Senior Phase. Schools across Scotland are already working closely with colleges, training providers and other partners to deliver relevant and engaging vocational options.

Teachers and lecturers do have a key role to play and we are working with partners including the National Implementation Board responsible for Teaching Scotland's Future, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish College for Educational Leadership to consider the professional learning implications of Developing the Young Workforce.

12. Education Scotland could place greater emphasis on parental engagement in its inspection and feedback process, as a means of helping schools to prioritise this area;

Education Scotland inspections seek to ascertain how well schools and early learning and childcare settings recognise and encourage the involvement of parents in their children's learning. Whilst parental engagement is not evaluated discretely as part of the inspection process, discussion with parents is a key feature of the inspection process.

Since the introduction of the Scottish School (Parental Involvement) Scotland Act 2006 and the National Parenting Strategy, evidence from HMI Inspections suggests that parental engagement is a key strength in schools. Where parental engagement is working well, there is evidence of impact on the curriculum and children's learning experiences. Following an inspection the chair of the Parent Council, in close consultation with head teacher, may share the main messages from inspection findings with the parent body and agree ways in which parents can support improvement in the school. Where inspection activity identifies a need for improvement, Education Scotland officers will engage with the service to support this.

As outlined under point 3, Education Scotland has committed to increase the focus on attainment and equity in their support and inspection of schools, and as part of this, will seek to ensure that there is a greater emphasis placed on parental engagement in its inspection and feedback process, as a means of helping schools to prioritise this area.

13. Teachers' awareness of the importance of parental involvement and engagement is crucially important, and initial teacher training and continuing professional development on this issue could be improved;

Work is on-going with Initial Teacher Education course providers and with local authorities regarding the support and training of new and fully qualified teachers. This will support a growing understanding of the positive impact of parental engagement on outcomes for children and families and equip practitioners with strategies to improve levels of parental engagement in learning at a local level.

The Scottish Government has funded Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) courses for teachers on Parental Engagement, delivered by Children in Scotland. These have a particular focus on how effective parental engagement strategies, which take account of local parental needs and existing community assets, can have significant positive impacts on pupil's attainment. Attendees at these courses are encouraged to take this learning back to their schools and work in collaboration with others to implement more effective practice.

To build further capacity in the system Education Scotland are currently working with partners to update existing resources and guidance available to schools around effective parental engagement.

14. In seeking to achieve a uniformly good standard of [parental] engagement and involvement throughout the country (but not a uniform approach), the Scottish Government could further encourage education authorities and schools to focus on what works, in particular, what measures would most likely improve pupils' attainment. Where there are gaps in Scottish research knowledge, these should be filled;

The Scottish Government is firmly committed to promoting evidenced based practice to support schools to develop approaches to parental engagement based on their local context and making best use of existing community assets. This is demonstrated through our 'Engaging with Families' web resource and associated CLPL sessions for teachers. We are planning to develop this resource further with additional evidence around engaging with families living with disabilities, travelling families and ethnic minority groups who may have unique circumstances that schools should be mindful of.

Furthermore, we are supporting schools and parents to access the information they need to develop effective engagement through the redeveloped Parentzone Scotland website. This site offers a range of available information on individual schools including performance data on literacy, numeracy and attainment alongside HMI inspection reports. It has been designed to help parents better understand Scottish education and to encourage more open dialogue between parents and schools.

The Government will continue to work with the National Parent Forum of Scotland, Scottish Parent Teacher Council, Scottish Parental Involvement Officers' Network and other stakeholders to further encourage education authorities and schools to facilitate good quality parental engagement and improvements.

15. All schools should have a parental engagement strategy.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 requires each local authority to prepare a strategy document setting out their policies for parental involvement. The statutory guidance accompanying the Act states that a schools' development plan should take account of the authority's strategy for parental involvement. In doing so, the school should include clear objectives as to the involvement of parents in the education provided to their child and to the school's pupils more generally.

Subsequent legislation on School Handbooks, the Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 provides a framework for local authorities and schools to develop, in partnership with parents, a School Handbook that reflects the needs and circumstances of each school community and includes information to help facilitate parental engagement.

16. We invite your view on how there could be more systematic engagement with parents across Scotland, with a particular focus on those whose children should be performing better.

As mentioned in the start of my letter, our legislative and policy framework provide us with a firm foundation to ensure that all children receive the best start in life and achieve their full potential in learning, life and work which includes recognising the vital role of families and communities. This framework includes: Getting it Right for Every Child, the National Parenting Strategy, the Early Years Framework, Curriculum for Excellence, Teaching Scotland's Future, National Youth Work Strategy 2014-2019, Developing the Young Workforce and the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006, all of which place a clear emphasis on the need to engage meaningfully and work in partnership with children, parents and families.

Targeted programmes such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge, Raising Attainment For All and the Early Years Collaborative, also make explicit the need for schools to consider parental engagement as part of their local improvement plans.

The Read, Write, Count campaign which will see every child in Scotland have access to a library of suitable books and educational materials, will include family engagement sessions to support parents to build a bridge between school, community and the home learning environment.

The combination of this focused policy framework supported by targeted programmes and inspection activities will ensure more widespread and systematic engagement with parents.

17. How will all pupils benefit from good quality work experience given differing labour market conditions across the country?

As part of Developing the Young Workforce, the new draft Standard for Work Placements is available on the Education Scotland website for wider feedback and review. This sets out expectations for all those with a role in achieving quality work placements. Over 300 young people have been involved in developing this and the associated draft Standard for Career Education, shaping their design and testing the language and rationale.

To support the implementation of the new Standard for Work Placements, 6 new toolkits will be co-produced with input from Education Scotland, local authorities, employers, parents and young people. Each toolkit will be developed in a different local authority area, representing a spread of demographics and will be representative of local challenges and opportunities. Each toolkit will feature in the final draft of the National Standard for Work Placements.

The employer-led regional 'Invest in Young People' groups will offer a straightforward route to employers, not only for work placements, but also help with designing teaching materials, or information about the current jobs market. They will focus on encouraging and supporting more employers locally to engage with schools and colleges; and get more employers to recruit young people directly from education.

18. How will barriers to accessing work placements (such as travel costs) be avoided, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds?

The draft Work Placements Standard is an inclusive standard which sets out expectations for young people and takes account of any barriers a young person may face in relation to physical, emotional and social wellbeing and any specific support needs.

The early action to fund activity in support of Developing the Young Workforce provided £6.5m to local authorities. We would expect the initial funding to support new activity and expansion of existing good practice. Financial costs in accessing work placements are the responsibility of local authorities but our commitment of initial funding in 2014/15 and discussions of funding for 2015/16 underline our commitment to support this programme with practical measures.

19. What is the exact role envisaged for the private sector in schools and where should any boundaries be drawn?

Employers can play a number of roles in schools. As well as offering work placement opportunities they can provide support to teachers and pupils through activity such as visits to schools to explain the world of work, coaching on securing employment, wider mentoring, workplace visits and support for enterprise education activities. In terms of curriculum, employers are well placed to work with staff to help shape activity which helps young people prepare for the challenges they will face as they move toward and into employment.

New guidance on school/employer partnerships will be available in the autumn. Whilst there should be benefits to both young people and employers from such interaction (e.g. mentoring young people can bring real benefits to the development and motivation of employer representatives), the focus must be on improving the understanding and skills of the learners. It would not be acceptable for an employer to use a relationship with a school as simply a commercial marketing opportunity.

The new Work Placements Standard sets out clear expectations for employers alongside those for young people, parents and schools/local authorities. These expectations for employers provide a strong steer as to their actions before, during and after any placement and sets out how employers are key to any learning undertaken in the workplace.

20. Noting recent research on the pilot 'Enterprising Schools Project', how can more schools place a greater emphasis on entrepreneurialism?

Enterprise and entrepreneurial education is fully embedded with the 3-18 curriculum in Scotland, being one of five cross-cutting themes which underpin and provide contexts for active learning across all subjects and curriculum areas. 'Scotland CAN DO', launched in November 2013, is our national statement of intent towards becoming a world-leading entrepreneurial and innovative nation. It adopts a shared vision for sustainable and inclusive growth. The Scotland CAN DO approach is being realised through the delivery of the Enterprising Schools Programme, a creative partnership between Education Scotland, Young Enterprise Scotland (YES) and a number of other contributors to entrepreneurial-learning and enterprise education, including social enterprise. Scotland's schools, colleges and universities have a crucial role in driving ambition and making our young people aware of their entrepreneurial potential. By delivering an entrepreneurial mind-set we can help ensure that our nation meets its full economic potential and all our people are able to benefit from such growth.

The Enterprising Schools Project aligns well with Developing the Young Workforce'. By embracing enterprise in an educational context, teachers can not only provide learners with

real life opportunities to develop an enterprising and entrepreneurial attitude, but also enable them to enhance core skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, thinking skills, working with others, career management and leadership skills. Education Scotland will promote the Enterprising Schools Project and its Glow-based portal through DYW and intends to feature this on the [‘Developing the Young Workforce’ website](#).

21. How can education authorities best be supported so that teachers have access to the most appropriate labour market information and advice?

Skills Development Scotland is working with a range of partners including local authorities and schools to develop the dynamic skills planning system based on the best labour market information available at a local, regional and national level. The development of Skills Investment Plans and Regional Skills Assessments provides much greater insight into the modern labour market than we have seen in the past. These provide a valuable resource for schools as well as other parts of the education system.

Through the implementation of the Careers Education Standard, Skills Development Scotland will work with teachers to help them access, understand and incorporate labour market information within their lesson plans.

22. How could education authorities and third sector groups work together more effectively so that young people’s performance is improved? The implementation plan describes ‘industry-led regional invest in young people groups’ that will develop closer links between schools and employers (and colleges). Could a similar approach be adopted for the third sector?

The new Community Learning and Development (CLD) Regulations (<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/communitylearninganddevelopment/about/policy/regulations.asp>) introduced in 2013 require all local authorities to publish plans by September 2015. These have considerable potential to more closely align the improvements in attainment that are outlined in the Plans of Community Planning Partners and local authorities with those of CLD and Third Sector Partners. Education Scotland have planned an Aspect Review of these new CLD plans in early 2016 that will focus on this area.

23. If the role of the third sector is to be re-defined, do you consider that it should be more focussed on closing the attainment gap? This is not currently the priority for at least some third sector groups with an education role.

Inspection Evidence from 200 Learning Community inspections across Scotland highlight the key and increasing role that Third Sector and CLD play in schools with the most vulnerable young people, so they already play an important part in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people. These partners often engage the hardest to reach and provide educational opportunities for both wider achievement and attainment. The new attainment advisors could have a role to play in making further connections and seeking out excellent practice.

24. To what extent should organisations other than schools provide educational opportunities for pupils and young people?

HM Inspectors in primary, secondary and Learning Community inspections have highlighted that a range of organisations already provide educational opportunities.

As the Committee acknowledges, third sector organisations already play a valuable role in the education of young people and this is increasingly recognised, e.g. through achievement of wider achievement awards in Insight. Working in partnership with local authorities there is undoubtedly potential for them to do more. For example they can play an invaluable role in developing young people's resilience and wellbeing.

25. Is there effective monitoring of how such organisations are helping to improve attainment and narrow the attainment gap?

At national level, there is now a bank of evidence from Inspection evidence from primary, secondary and Learning Community inspection that has highlighted that a range of organisations already provide educational opportunities that help to raise attainment and narrow the attainment gap. The new Attainment advisors can help support education authorities make more effective links with CLD and Third Sector organisations.

26. If colleges and schools work more closely together, issues may arise around timetabling, but also around possible resource transfers to colleges and differing standards of training, pay or other employment conditions in the sectors. What measures are being taken by the Scottish Government to ensure that such issues are addressed effectively?

Although there are undoubtedly potential barriers, many local authorities, schools and colleges are already working together to plan and deliver learning in the senior phase. Examples include the foundation apprenticeship pathfinders in Fife and West Lothian, the seven early adopters and the South East Scotland Academies Partnership. As evaluation of these programmes is undertaken, lessons will be shared in order to inform activity going forward. The Government will work closely with representative organisations to ensure resources are used appropriately and in line with professional standards.

27. Given the links between socio-economic inequalities and attainment, how could the [DYW] implementation plan place more emphasis on this particular issue?

Developing the Young Workforce is central to our efforts to build a fairer society, tackling inequality and ensuring sustainable economic growth. As with our work in establishing the Widening Access Commission, our commitment to ensuring fair access to opportunities in education, skills and training remains firm and demonstrable. Our implementation plan is the blueprint for our headline target to reduce youth unemployment by 40% by 2021. It is predicated on helping all our young people access a range of learning to support them into quality employment, recognising the need to provide them with a variety of learning opportunities in school and beyond. This will support those at risk of disengaging from learning by offering them a broader range of options, linked to employer demand and making connections to the local labour market. Strengthening the connections between young people in areas of socio-economic deprivation to local employers will in particular increase the opportunities for them to see the value in their learning.

The Government is happy to consider this further in light of the Education (Scotland) Bill duties on Ministers and local authorities to report progress in tackling the attainment gap. Annual reporting on progress against our initial DYW implementation plan gives us the flexibility, working with local government and delivery partners to respond to new developments and innovations.

ANGELA CONSTANCE