Thank you for your letter of 19 March on petition PE1668 (Improving literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction) seeking an update on development of the self-evaluation framework and my views on the suggestions by the petitioner and supporters that there is currently insufficient provision of research-informed reading instruction training within initial teacher education institutions.

I would like to begin by acknowledging points of agreement with the petitioner. As mentioned in my submission of 14 December, there is research evidence to endorse the use of the Systematic Synthetic Phonics approach, when taught well. Teachers should access research-informed early reading instruction that will benefit all learners and should be knowledgeable enough to be able to match classroom approaches to the wide range of needs of the learners that they teach. The chosen approach should be set within a rich literacy environment in which children are taught reading comprehension and are supported to develop a love of independent reading. Further, Education Scotland does acknowledge that for some teachers, there are gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the latest and highest quality research in early reading instruction.

There has been much interest in the content of ITE courses, most prominently through the work of the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee on Teacher Workforce Planning (1 September 2017) and through the Content Analysis of ITE (17 May 2017). Evidence given to the Committee highlighted significant variance in the quality of student experience and in the time spent on key areas of the curriculum.

I have invited Education Scotland to work with colleagues to develop a new self-evaluation framework to support the universities which provide initial teacher education to evaluate their work. It is being designed to support teacher education universities to identify what is working well, including highlighting features of their own highly effective practice. It will also help stakeholders to recognise and develop a shared understanding of what needs to be done collectively to secure improvements. It will focus on the quality of learning and teaching within ITE and key priorities including literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing as well as additional support needs. The framework is being delivered in partnership with teacher education universities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) given their responsibility for course accreditation. It is being designed to take account of existing quality assurance processes currently in place.

Education Scotland and the Deans of the ITE institutions met in December 2017 and agreed to set up a Working Group to develop a new self-evaluation framework for ITE ("the Framework"). The Working Group includes representatives from Education Scotland, ITE institutions, GTCS and the Scottish Government. The Working Group has met several times. The Working Group aims for the draft Framework to be available by June 2018.

For teachers already working within the system, the ongoing work of Education Scotland associated with the Scottish Attainment Challenge and supported by content on the National Improvement Hub, is helping local authorities and schools to make improvements in their provision of early literacy instruction. In addition, as outlined in Education Governance: Next Steps (published June 2017) there is a commitment to a renewed focus on professional learning and leadership for Education Scotland, delivered through the new regional improvement collaboratives meaning that hands-on advice, support and guidance can flow directly to schools to support improvement.

There is also the Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit. This is an accessible summary of educational research designed to inform discussions on the most effective approaches to improving pupil attainment. It contains 34 teaching approaches and interventions, one of which focuses on phonics. Each is summarised in terms of their average impact on attainment, the strength of the evidence supporting them and their cost. The toolkit's summary of phonics, for example, explores the relative benefits of different phonics approaches as part of a wider literacy strategy. A Scottish specific version of the toolkit, which is hosted on Education Scotland's National Improvement Hub, will grow to include Scottish specific content over the coming months.

I hope that this information assists the Committee in understanding the work currently underway to ensure that teachers have access to the training and information they need to deliver the best possible education to each child in Scotland, particularly in priority areas such as literacy.