The consultation makes reference to the fact that there has been little improvement in levels of attainment for Looked After Children, ‘despite the considerable volume of policy, guidance and legislation in this area’. Bearing in mind the rationale behind this consultation, an immediate reaction would be that the word ‘resources’ is missing from this list.

Nonetheless, on closer inspection of the aforementioned documentation it is evident that there are common strands within each particular aspect of support. In relation specifically to attainment levels, HMLe’s ‘Count Us In: Improving the education of our looked after children’ (2008) is of particular significance.

Common issues identified within a school context by HMLe (both mainstream and residential) include:

- Corporate parenting responsibilities
- Partnerships
- Strategic Planning and Review
- Assessing and Meeting Needs
- Education Placement and Curriculum Flexibility
- Participation and Advocacy
- Transitions
- Home-School Links
- Training and Development

The strategic recommendations made by HMLe to improve the support provision to looked after children are not being implemented successfully. The requirement for this consultation is evidence of this. It may be appropriate to look at one of the strategic recommendations as an exemplar and highlight some associated practical issues in its implementation.

Corporate Parenting - Improving monitoring, tracking and information sharing on looked after children so that they know who their looked after children are, where they are, and how well they are doing;

To monitor educational outcomes, effective communication should involve the channelling of accurate information to all relevant stakeholders, whether they are looked after children, parents, schools, social work, etc.

Robust systems are required for schools, local authorities and Scottish Government to effectively manage and monitor levels of attendance, exclusion, school and placement moves and attainment. This would allow schools to implement early intervention strategies if difficulties arise. Early intervention is critical in supporting looked after children.
Schools can only activate support systems if they know which pupils are looked after. Being looked after can often lead to a child going through a number of transitional phases, e.g. from parent to kinship carer, from parent to foster carer, from foster carer to residential home, etc. As a result of this, information contained within local authority data tracking systems can often be of variable quality and accuracy. Reconciling inaccurate data on looked after children held between different agencies often exacerbates the situation. As a solution, it has been suggested that there is a need for upgrading and integration, rather than having separate agency databases.

Issues relating to security within a school of sensitive and confidential information often inhibit its dissemination.

It should be recognised that many looked after children, especially looked after and accommodated young people, often face multiple disadvantages and challenges which require labour-intensive approaches from local authorities and where progress is relative.

At a more practical level in terms of attainment, once a looked after child is enrolled, there is often little or no information passed on to the host school on previous levels of attainment within subject areas to provide progression of learning. Often time is wasted having to re-assess.

Similarly, internal assessment results for certificate courses are often not communicated to the new host school. The situation is further exacerbated in some subjects where there is an expectation that assessed work from candidates, e.g. folios, models, etc, have to be posted on to the new school for appeals or moderation purposes. The designated senior manager with corporate parenting responsibilities within the school often has many other responsibilities as part of their remit. There is often no formal time set aside for the designated senior manager to prepare and plan for the looked after child’s integration into the school community. This process soon becomes fragmented as it relies upon an effective information flow from other outside agencies. Simple tasks such as arranging meetings become much more complex due to key individuals, e.g. parents, social workers, etc, being unavailable.

As illustrated, failure in implementing the HMIe recommendations may be due to a number of factors; lack of prioritisation, lack of appropriate resources, inadequate management structures, etc. These are all factors experienced by other agencies which are trying to be addressed through the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) initiative.

GIRFEC is an attempt to improve inter-agency collaboration within children’s services. The rationale and planning behind GIRFEC has been considered and consulted upon. Examples of best practice have been identified and guidance issued. Unfortunately, the implementation has been flawed. In essence, implementation timescales have been unrealistic and allocated resources have been insufficient.
A more detailed analysis of GIRFEC implementation would be relevant to this consultation.

Societal problems also inhibit the educational attainment levels of looked after children.

There can be a ‘labelling’ process attached to those children that are looked after. This means that looked after children often find it difficult to establish relationships with peers and mental health issues, such as anxiety, can arise.

To counteract this ‘labelling’ effect of being in care, looked after children often feel under pressure at the age of 16 to come out of the care system and become tenants. The extra financial pressure encourages them to leave the education system.

Peer group pressure is often a difficulty for a looked after child. Young children often find themselves in accommodation with older children who have a negative impact on them. This is often mirrored within friendship groups in schools.

However, there are other considerations to take into account when examining educational provision for looked after children. Curriculum for Excellence emphasises the need for a more holistic approach to education. This principal applies to all categories of children, but perhaps even more so for a Looked After Child.

A child’s emotional and social wellbeing are key contributory factors to their intellectual development and deficiencies can lead to underachievement. Arguably, looked after children feel compelled to address their social and emotional wellbeing needs first, before focussing on intellectual development. This may hide the fact that many looked after children are indeed making real progress in their education, even though it may not manifest itself in terms of attainment levels. A lack of success in schools in attainment levels may manifest itself in later years in relation to lifelong learning opportunities.

On a similar vein, and more importantly, Curriculum for Excellence focuses on achievement, rather than attainment. All things being equal, it should provide the flexibility to allow looked after children to identify and record their wider achievements through a more tailored curriculum.

To conclude, allocating appropriate resources to re-dress the balance in attainment levels of looked after children will be more challenging in this age of austerity. Local authorities are streamlining support services, not only in Education, resulting in revised remits and increased workload. Furthermore, staffing levels within schools are being diminished, especially in relation to specialist provision and auxiliary support.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of this is the dearth of LAC teachers within the education system. Initial evidence suggests that such posts are being further reduced as a result of financial pressures. These LAC teachers are the individuals who are the most qualified to provide the support required to improve attainment levels.