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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF  
ST HELENS  
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS  
in conjunction with the  
AUDIT COMMISSION**

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## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

## INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation, and on discussions with LEA members, staff in the department of community education and leisure services and in other council departments, representatives of the LEA's partners, and representative groups of headteachers and governors. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 73 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to eleven primary schools, four secondary schools, two special schools and one pupil referral unit. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits and discussions considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

4. Evidence was also drawn from recent visits to St Helens schools and analysis of LEA documentation by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI), undertaking national monitoring work.

## COMMENTARY

5. St Helens is a small metropolitan borough lying between Liverpool and Manchester. It serves a largely white population, which is affected by considerable deprivation, mainly as the result of the decline of the glass and coal mining industries.

6. The council's key priority is the economic regeneration of the borough by fostering social inclusion and raising educational attainment. The council has formed strong and highly co-operative partnerships that have been very successful in promoting regeneration.

7. The political and professional leadership of the authority is good. The central place held by education in the council's plans for regeneration is shown in the level of funding provided for it by the council and from external sources. The council's commitment to education is showing signs of success.

8. Educational attainment has improved steadily. At the ages of seven and 11, the attainment of pupils in English, mathematics and science is above the national average and that of similar LEAs. In the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the rate of improvement has been greater than the national rate and in similar LEAs; attainment is now broadly in line with the national average. There are no schools in special measures and few schools cause particular concern.

9. Much of the credit for the improvement in performance lies with the schools, but the LEA has made a significant contribution through effective challenge and well-targeted support. The LEA places the responsibility for improvement rightly upon the headteacher and the governing body. Both the LEA and the schools have a clear view of their respective roles and, as a result, the relationship between them is close, without being collusive.

10. The LEA is prepared to tackle difficult issues; its decision-making is timely. Some functions that were identified as a weakness in the LEA in the past, such as support for early years and support for schools causing concern, are now strengths. When areas of concern are identified in schools, the LEA clearly sets out the action required and makes effective use of good practice elsewhere to support improvement.

11. The LEA has also made significant progress in tackling social inclusion. The strategy for special educational needs, whilst new, has already reduced the number of statements and the central resources committed to out of borough placements, and there is a redirection of resources to schools to support the policy of inclusion and early intervention.

12. The LEA has few weaknesses, none of which are pronounced. It performs the following functions particularly effectively:

- the monitoring, challenge, intervention and support provided to schools;
- the strategic planning and effectiveness of services for school improvement;
- the focus of support upon areas of greatest need;

- support to raise standards of literacy;
- support to raise standards of numeracy;
- support to schools causing concern;
- support for early years;
- support for governors;
- corporate planning and the partnership with other agencies and groups;
- the leadership given by elected members and senior officers;
- support to schools from financial and personnel services;
- asset management planning;
- the provision for pupils who have no school place;
- support for behaviour at school;
- support and training for child protection; and
- measures to combat social exclusion.

13. The following functions are not performed effectively:

- support to schools for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum;
- meeting all the statutory responsibilities for the education of Traveller children; and
- the construction of a coherent Education Development Plan.

14. Although there are weaknesses in the construction of the Education Development Plan, overall educational planning is good. The LEA had formulated and was implementing its three-year strategic plan for education before the national requirement to produce an Education Development Plan. The strategic plan is concise, sets ambitious targets, and is clearly linked to the council's strategy to raise attainment and foster social inclusion. The strategic plan is a focal and pertinent document for the planning of educational development in the borough.

15. A key strength of St Helens LEA in recent years has been its ability to identify key priorities and act upon them. Performance is assessed and action taken upon the results. The LEA is very effective in a wide range of its functions and it shows the prospect of improving still further.

## SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

### Context

16. St Helens is a metropolitan borough lying between Liverpool and Manchester. According to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions Index of Deprivation 2000, it is the forty-second most deprived district of 354 English local authorities. Within the borough, there are wide variations in deprivation. Thirteen of the eighteen wards in St Helens are amongst the 20 per cent most deprived wards in England; seven wards are amongst the ten per cent most disadvantaged. The proportion of adults with higher education qualifications is below the national average.

17. The glass and coal mining industries have declined, contributing to an unemployment rate of 6.4 per cent, which is above the national average. Youth unemployment for the 18-25 age range is 27.3 per cent, higher than for authorities in Merseyside, the North West and England.

18. The population of St Helens is approximately 180,000. The school population in January 2000 was 29,500. There has been a decline of 14 per cent in live births between 1992 and 1999. The borough has a small population of ethnic minority heritage of 0.5 per cent. One per cent of the school population is of non-white UK heritage, well below the national figure of 12.1 per cent.

19. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in primary and secondary schools is above that found nationally; 23.0 per cent in primary schools compared to 19.7 per cent nationally, and 21.0 per cent in secondary schools compared to 17.6 per cent nationally.

20. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) in primary and secondary schools is above the average found in similar authorities<sup>1</sup> and nationally. In 2000, 3.3 per cent of primary aged pupils had a statement (2.7 per cent nationally) and 5.6 per cent of secondary aged pupils had a statement (4.0 per cent nationally). The percentage of primary aged pupils educated in special schools is 1.1 per cent, similar to the national average, but the percentage of secondary aged pupils so educated is 2.2 per cent, greater than the national average of 1.5 per cent.

21. St Helens maintains two nurseries and 59 primary schools (55 all-through primary schools, two junior schools and two infant schools). Forty-five per cent of these schools are voluntary aided and a further eight per cent are voluntary controlled. There are twelve secondary schools, four of which are voluntary aided. Six secondary schools have post-16 provision. Post-16 provision is also available in the voluntary aided Carmel College, and at St Helens College. There are four special schools and two pupil referral units. A reorganisation of special schools has been agreed in principle by the council. There are six Beacon schools in the borough, five of which are primary schools. Two secondary schools received specialist technology status in September 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> St Helens' statistical neighbours are: Barnsley, Dudley, Gateshead, Havering, North Tyneside, Rotherham, Stockton-on-Tees, Tameside, Wakefield and Wigan.

## Performance

22. Key features of the performance of schools and pupils in St Helens are given below.

- OFSTED inspection data shows that the attainment of pupils on entry to primary schools is slightly below the national average;
- attainment at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 in all core subjects is above that found in similar authorities and nationally. The rate of improvement in both Key Stages is broadly in line with the national trend in English and science, but above for mathematics;
- attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is broadly in line with attainment in similar authorities and nationally. The rate of improvement in English and science is above the national trend and well above the national trend in mathematics;
- at the end of Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A\*-C grades in GCSE is above that found in similar authorities and slightly above the national average. The rate of improvement in the percentage of five A\*-C grades has been greater than that in similar authorities and nationally. The percentage of pupils gaining at least one A\*-G grade and five A\*-G grades is broadly in line with the percentages found in similar authorities and nationally;
- the average points score for pupils entered for two or more A levels and GNVQ (Advanced) was above that in similar authorities and nationally in 1999, but it has slipped slightly below in 2000;
- the progress of pupils between Key Stages 1 and 2 is well above the national average; between Key Stages 2 and 3, it is in line with the national average whilst between Key Stages 3 and 4, it is slightly below the national average.

23. OFSTED inspection data indicates that the percentage of primary schools in St Helens judged good or very good (77 per cent) is above the national average (71 per cent) and the average found in similar authorities (69 per cent). Evidence from the primary schools that have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made in the quality of education and in the management and efficiency of the school. Few primary schools in St Helens are identified as requiring much improvement.

24. For secondary schools, OFSTED inspection data shows that the percentage of schools judged good or very good (75 per cent) is above the average found in similar authorities (68 per cent) and nationally (68 per cent). Evidence from the secondary schools that have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made in the quality of education, management and efficiency, and the climate of the school. No secondary schools in St Helens are identified as requiring much improvement.

25. Attendance in primary schools is broadly in line with the national average, although the rate of unauthorised absence is lower than that found nationally. Attendance in secondary schools is broadly in line with the national average. The rate of unauthorised absence in secondary schools has been below the national average for several years, but has risen and now equals the national average. The level of permanent exclusions in both primary and secondary schools is below the level found in similar authorities and nationally.

26. In January 2001, no schools were subject to special measures and one primary school has been found by OFSTED to have serious weaknesses. In addition, the LEA has identified three primary schools and three secondary schools as causing concern.

## Funding

27. The Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) funding allocation per pupil in St Helens is slightly lower than the average for metropolitan authorities; £2384 per pupil in the primary sector (average £2433) and £3083 per pupil in the secondary sector (average £3144). The council demonstrates the high priority that it gives to education by continuing to spend above the education SSA. It is within the highest quarter of those authorities spending above the education SSA, although the extra spending as a proportion of SSA has fallen.

	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
<b>Budget (£000)</b>	69,600	71,866	71,470	76,957	80,058	83,253
<b>SSA (£000)</b>	63,280	66,604	67,051	73,731	76,502	80,385
<b>Budget as % of SSA</b>	109.99%	107.90%	106.59%	104.38%	104.65%	103.57%

28. The council and its partnership groups have been successful in obtaining extra resources for education over a number of years. The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), New Opportunities Fund (NOF) and European Social Fund (ESF) have provided over £7m for schools in the last three years. Recently, there has been a substantial improvement in the level of information and communication technology equipment available in many schools in the borough as a result of this additional funding. The council has received more than the average level of resources from the New Deal for Schools and this, combined with the revenue and capital contributions made by the local authority, has improved the condition of school buildings.

29. The council delegated 84.0 per cent of the Local Schools' Budget in 2000/01, slightly below the metropolitan average of 84.9 per cent and the national average of 84.2 per cent. The main features are shown below.

- central management costs (£60 per pupil) are higher than the average (£48 per pupil) and just meet the Government's target. Much of the difference results from the way in which costs are allocated to this area of expenditure;

- transport costs (£55 per pupil) are higher than the metropolitan average (£42 per pupil). The authority has a relatively generous policy of providing free transport even if the pupil is not going to the nearest school;
- pupil support, including clothing grants, (£17 per pupil) is higher than the average (£6 per pupil);
- existing early retirement costs (£48 per pupil) are higher than the average (£34 per pupil). The LEA has now reviewed its premature retirement scheme and the budget for newly incurred expenditure is around the average;
- the budgets for education welfare, the youth service and adult education are lower than average.

### **Council structure**

30. St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council adopted a pilot structure in April 2000 under Government proposals for modernising local government. The council has 54 members, comprising 35 Labour, 15 Liberal Democrat and four Conservative. Within the cabinet of ten members, there are two portfolios linked to the functions of the department of community education and leisure services. One portfolio covers life long learning; the other covers social and cultural development.

31. A scrutiny committee examines decisions made by other committees and decisions made by chief officers under delegated powers. In addition, an education scrutiny and review sub-committee has been formed that includes membership from partner groups, including parent governor representatives. The scrutiny function is not yet fully effective, but members are receiving training in the use and interpretation of performance indicators to strengthen their role. There are six area forums for consultation and communication between elected members and the community.

### **The Education Development Plan**

32. The Education Development Plan has seven priorities:

- raising the standard of provision for under-fives in St Helens schools;
- raising standards in literacy and numeracy;
- using information and communication technology to support teaching and learning and to raise standards;
- raising standards and supporting teaching and learning in areas of the curriculum;
- raising educational standards and improving the identification and assessment of children with special educational needs and those at risk of underachievement;
- LEA supported school self review; and
- LEA strategies for identifying and improving schools causing concern.

33. The priorities are based on a detailed audit and are relevant to the needs of the LEA and its schools. As a result of the analysis of school inspection reports and performance data, a local dimension to the EDP is given by the inclusion of the

priority for early years provision and the inclusion of activities for modern foreign languages. Consultation on the EDP was satisfactory and amendments were made in the light of responses received. The EDP was approved by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) for three years.

34. There are significant weaknesses in the EDP. There is a lack of coherence between audit, priorities, activities and outcomes. Some activities relating to curriculum support are clearly linked to audit, such as the development of modern foreign languages, music and religious education, but reasons for the inclusion of some other activities, such as science, physical education and standards in careers education and guidance, are not clear. The quality and precision of activity plans is variable and many do not have sharp evaluative criteria by which to judge outcomes.

35. There are few pupils of ethnic minority heritage in St Helens. Nevertheless, the reference made to them within the priority for pupils at risk of underachievement is brief and inadequate. The 2000/01 plan, however, includes activities to support these pupils.

36. There is some inconsistency between the original targets set by schools and by the LEA. Aggregated school targets for Key Stage 2 literacy in 2000 were four points below the LEA target, whilst those for numeracy were three points above the LEA target. Results in 2000 show that the LEA target for literacy was achieved and the target for numeracy was exceeded by seven per cent.

### **Progress in implementing the Education Development Plan**

37. Despite the weaknesses in the EDP, there is a well-established pattern of strategic planning within the LEA, of which the EDP is an integral part. There has been good progress with EDP activities, particularly in early years, literacy, numeracy and in raising the attainment of boys. The 2000/01 EDP, whilst identifying the same priorities, changes the grouping of activities and adds some new ones. However, the revised Plan does not identify the activities that have been concluded, those that are being continued and those where progress has not been maintained. As a result, some lack of coherence in the original EDP is also evident in the 2000/01 plan.

38. Monitoring arrangements for the EDP are satisfactory. Analysis and evaluation of progress are reported termly to the departmental management team. There is an interim review and a full review of the EDP and the LEA's strategic plan for education each year. These reviews involve headteachers and representatives of governing bodies.

39. Progress against the EDP targets set for 2002 is good. In 2000, Key Stage 2 results in English (79 per cent) matched the LEA target and are now six points below the target set for 2002. Key Stage 2 results in mathematics (77 per cent) exceeded the LEA target by seven points and are now just three points below the target set for 2002. GCSE results have shown significant improvement. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A\*-C grades in 2000 was 48.5 per cent, exceeding the EDP target of 47 per cent for 2001, and approaching the ambitious target of 50 per cent set for 2001 in the strategic plan. The target set for the average GCSE points score

in 2002 has been achieved in 2000. It is therefore illogical that the LEA target for five A\*-C grades in 2001 and 2002 should have been reduced in the revised EDP for 2000-1 to 45 per cent and 46 per cent respectively when the results in 2000 exceed both targets.

40. Progress towards the targets set for exclusions is very good. In 1999-2000, there were 23 permanent exclusions, well below the target set for 2002. Progress has been made towards targets set for attendance. However, authorised absence in primary schools remains above the national average; unauthorised absence in secondary schools, previously below the national average, now equals the national average. Improving attendance has been included within activities in the 2000/01 EDP.

### **The allocation of resources to priorities**

41. There are strong links between the council's priority for regeneration, its positive financial support for education and its successful bids for extra resources through a variety of partnerships. There are good processes to allocate resources to priorities but there is some lack of clarity in schools about the range and scope of the various sources of funding now available. Resources are targeted effectively to support school improvement. The council has developed a three-year framework for financial planning, but it has encountered some difficulties as a result of uncertainties in the grant settlement.

42. Consultation about budget setting with headteachers and governors is good. Schools are given early indications of their likely budget for the following year at the end of October, based on pupil numbers in September. A further indication is given at the end of February, based on January Form 7 pupil numbers. Budget meetings, to which governors are invited, are held with all schools in mid-March.

43. The original formula for the delegation of school funding has been reviewed and modified several times following consultation with schools. A revised formula based on the resource needs of individual schools was subject to consultation in 1995 but the costs at that time were too great. Currently, the relative funding provided for Key Stage 4 is more generous than the average in similar authorities.

44. The LEA has a clear financial plan for implementing its strategy for special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion. As the numbers of statements and out of borough placements for SEN are reduced, resources are being redirected from central budgets to schools. In the financial year 2000/01, £1m additional funding was delegated to schools. The LEA plans to delegate a further £400,000 in the next financial year.

45. Funding for statements of special educational need is currently allocated by a formula that is not linked sufficiently to individual needs and, as a result, it is difficult to demonstrate that individual pupil entitlement has been met. Following consultation with schools, the LEA intends to introduce a more equitable and transparent funding mechanism based on a banding system of support that will direct resources at individual pupil needs and which will be subject to moderation. All of

the schools visited during the inspection were in favour of this revised method of allocation.

46. In addition to the resources delegated specifically for special educational needs, a further £2.27m is delegated to schools on the basis of entitlement to free school meals (the social factor) and £1.65m as additional educational needs factors. The intended use of these resources and the link to delegated special educational needs resources is not clear to schools.

47. Further resources are available to schools through the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative and the resources obtained through the council's partnerships. Schools welcome the additional resources, but they are not clear about the criteria for their use, the methods of allocation of the funding and the relationship between the use of these funds and their delegated school budget.

## **Best Value**

48. Elected members and senior officers give a high priority to Best Value. Performance indicators and targets are reviewed regularly by members, although there is a need for greater clarity in some of the local indicators. The Best Value Performance Plan was judged by the external auditor to be compliant with the Local Government Act 1999 and DETR guidance in all significant aspects. It currently forms the council's business plan.

49. Pilot Best Value reviews have been carried out on the provision made for moderate and specific learning difficulties, services to governors and LEA support services to schools. These were conducted before the council's current guidance for reviews was finalised. As pilot reviews, they have not been subject to formal inspection.

50. The council has in place a five-year programme for reviewing all education services. Relatively poorly performing services are subject to early review, but this programme is currently being reconsidered to take account of the experience gained in the first year.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to strengthen the strategy for school improvement:**

- improve the Educational Development Plan by establishing clear links between audit, priorities, activities and outcomes, and set sharp criteria by which to judge success.

### **In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:**

- ensure that schools understand the criteria for the use of additional sources of funding, the methods of allocation of the funding and the relationship between the use of these funds and the school's delegated budget; and

- make clear to schools the intended purpose of funding that is delegated for the social factor and the additional educational needs factors.

## **SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Implications of other functions**

51. The strategy for school improvement is central to the council's objective for regeneration in the borough. LEA support for school improvement is good and has contributed to significant improvements in English and mathematics at Key Stage 2 and to steadily improving GCSE results. In the schools visited during the inspection, the support given by the LEA was judged to be sufficient in 17 of the 18 schools, and effective in 16.

52. Management services in general are supporting school improvement. The effective support being provided by financial services and personnel services enables headteachers to concentrate upon raising standards. Support for behaviour, welfare, child protection and services for pupils with special educational needs are also making a significant contribution to school improvement and to the council's objective for social inclusion. The strategy for Special Educational Needs (SEN) is new and, whilst it is supported by the schools, its impact is not yet clear to staff in all the schools. Support for the development of information and communication technology (ICT) is not yet contributing sufficiently to school improvement.

### **Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention**

53. The LEA's strategy for monitoring the work of its schools and for ensuring that support is delivered where it is needed most has been revised in the course of the last year. It was published in its final form in December 2000 as the 'strategic statement on support and intervention', but was already firmly established in practice. The strategy is clear, differentiated according to the success or otherwise of the schools, and is enabling the LEA to make an effective contribution to school improvement. The school survey showed that schools hold a positive view of the LEA's school improvement work.

54. Each school is assigned to one of five categories, ranging from the core support provided to the great majority of schools to formal, statutory, intervention. The school visits showed that the LEA knows its schools well, and that the schools know which category they are in. The visits also showed that the schools are correctly categorised, that they agree with their category and that they understand the amount of advisory time to which the category entitles them.

55. The schools in the first category are entitled to up to three days of advisory time each year. Each of these visits has a defined theme and a specified set of work to be done but the agenda for the visit may be, in part, negotiated between the school and the link adviser to enable the school to seek consultancy on matters of its own choosing. The visits established that this opportunity, where taken up, is appreciated and used well by the schools. In practice some schools in this core category receive more support than they are entitled to, but this is not provided to the detriment of other schools more in need of challenge and support, nor does it lead to dependency on the part of the schools. The visits and discussions with head teachers and advisers showed a clear and shared understanding that the LEA is seeking to promote schools' autonomy effectively.

56. The support provided to schools in all categories is accompanied by challenge. The effective differentiation of the work was illustrated well in one of the schools visited which had been formed as a result of amalgamation. The test results of one of the previous schools required challenge and received it. That challenge was accompanied by increased support for literacy and numeracy and led to improved results.

57. Inevitably, in this size of LEA, there are some gaps in the advisory service's coverage of specialisms. Various means are used to deal with this. These include buying in specialist help from other LEAs, for example to provide support for religious education, for music and for humanities, and secondment from the LEA's own schools, for example to provide secondary phase expertise in literacy and numeracy. The expertise to be found in the authority's Beacon schools is also used to support advisory provision but this work is at an early stage of development and it is too soon to assess its effectiveness. Officers are aware of the need to disseminate the good practice which is to be found in the authority's schools and, through their monitoring activities, they are aware of where it is to be found. There is, however, no formal register of such good practice and the potential of the VIPER (virtual interactive professional educational resource) intranet system to spread it is, although recognised, under-developed. The school visits showed the need and demand for the best work to be spread more widely.

58. The planning of the advisory service derives from its mission statement, the education strategic plan and the Education Development Plan, and extended more recently in the strategic policy for support and intervention. It is well linked to the priorities of the LEA and the needs of schools. The work is further developed into an operational service plan.

59. The service is well led and well managed. The three senior advisers carry, respectively, the management responsibilities for primary, secondary and special schools and form a tripartite head of the service. Each also carries some extra responsibilities, not directly connected with advisory work.

60. There is no formal system of performance management for the advisory service, but many of the necessary features of such a system are evident in practice. In preparation for the Best Value review of the service scheduled for the next financial year, the service has developed a series of performance indicators and can demonstrate its success in reaching them. There is an appraisal system to assess the advisers and surveys of, and meetings with, headteachers are also used to assess the effectiveness of the service. A review of the LEA's work with schools causing concern was carried out at the LEA's request by another authority. In response to the findings of these evaluative activities, there has been positive change. For example, the arrangements which enable schools to set part of the agenda for advisory visits were introduced in response to headteachers' comments.

### **Collection and analysis of data**

61. The schools are supplied with data of high quality, clearly presented to enable them to see how well their pupils are performing, nationally and in relation to similar

schools and to other schools in the area. Combined with the schools' data on individual pupils, these statistics provided by the LEA form the basis of the target-setting process. The progress made by the LEA's schools in meeting the demanding targets they set is the chief indicator of the success of the work.

62. The school visits made it clear that the target-setting process, which depends crucially on the work of link advisers during one of their core school visits, is a challenging one. Targets which are lower than those which the LEA's statistical analysis suggests are attainable are not accepted, and any school failing to meet its target is followed up under the policy for school improvement. The process is heavily dependent on statistical analysis to establish predictions and to change these into targets. In this work, several schools report excellent support from the LEA's statistical officer. The process is also one which is developing, and which is becoming more effective as it places more emphasis on the use of data to identify aspects of schools' work which can be improved in order to increase pupils' attainment. The advisers are encouraging schools to incorporate work with performance data into their development planning. This policy is beginning to show some effect in sharpening schools' awareness of the need for improvement, for example in the work of individual subjects. It is also an important element in the development of one school at present causing concern. However, schools' performance in this part of their work varies in effectiveness and there remain schools in which performance data is used to promote the progress of individual pupils but not to diagnose the need for institutional change.

### **Support for literacy**

63. English test results at the end of Key Stage 2 have, since 1997, been above the results obtained nationally and in similar authorities. They have improved at a rate similar to the national rate and show the LEA clearly on track to meet its 2002 target.

64. The work is managed by a primary adviser and delivered by two full time consultants in the primary phase and a half-time consultant, funded through the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), to develop work in Key Stage 3, pending the appointment of a full time consultant for that key stage under the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in April 2001. A strength of the work is that support is geared well to the needs of the schools. Schools needing extra support have been categorised as requiring either 'intensive' support or, if requiring less extra help, as requiring 'additional' support. The deployment of this extra support is managed through the arrangements for schools causing concern.

65. The support provided in all categories of schools is valued by headteachers and their staffs. The courses, the consultancy work and the telephone helpline have all been found most useful. NLS work in St Helens is also distinguished by its attention to local needs. Analysis of test results has revealed poor performance by boys, particularly in writing. An initiative to combat that weakness has been started but has yet to show a clear effect on test results. Extra support is also being delivered to a group of 26 schools identified in March 2000 which were considered capable of exceeding their 2001 targets. The schools were helped to identify pupils who, it was judged, would benefit from specific individual learning targets. As well as

leading literacy teachers, the authority has identified leading literacy headteachers who are being used to develop the management of literacy work in other schools.

66. National Literacy Strategy work has been started in Key Stage 3 with training for all heads of English, school based training for other English teachers, some cross curricular, and some other work on boys and writing. The LEA is well-placed to embark on supporting literacy work in secondary schools. One of those visited had already begun a useful programme, building on activities begun in a literacy summer school.

67. The support for literacy is managed well; it is adjusted to local needs and can be seen to be effective in the schools.

### **Support for numeracy**

68. In 1997, the same proportion of the LEA's pupils obtained Level 4 in the end of Key Stage 2 as did so nationally. Since then, having initiated its support for numeracy in advance of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS), the LEA's performance has improved at a rate faster than the national improvement. Throughout the period the schools have met the aggregate of their individual targets across the LEA and exceeded the more modest targets agreed for the LEA by the DfEE.

69. As with literacy, support for numeracy is well suited to the needs of the schools. In 1999/2000, there were ten schools receiving intensive support. Those schools made three times the progress of the LEA's other schools. Extra support for numeracy is also deployed through the system for schools causing concern. The support clearly recognises local needs. In this present year it is placing particular emphasis on the development of teachers' subject knowledge in an in-service training programme open to all teachers in the authority. The particular need for this emphasis was established through analysis of findings from consultants' visits to schools and through forum discussion with headteachers.

70. The National Numeracy Strategy work is managed by the senior primary adviser, supported by one consultant for Key Stages 1 and 2, and by two seconded Key Stage 3 teachers, together providing 0.5 of a full-time equivalent. Given the heavy in-service training commitment, the staffing is hard-pressed in Key Stage 2 but the LEA is able to provide adequate support through judicious use of the leading mathematics teachers, several of whom have had leadership experience in the subject in other LEAs.

71. A start on work in Key Stage 3 has been made with a preliminary audit of development needs and a policy decision to seek to integrate numeracy work in existing mathematics syllabuses rather than to set it up as a separate curriculum entity.

72. The LEA's support for numeracy is well managed. The evidence of the progress made by the pupils, particularly those in the schools which have received the most intensive support, shows that it is very effective.

## **Support for information and communication technology (ICT)**

73. Support for developing the ICT infrastructure in schools and for administrative uses of ICT has been satisfactory. Support for the use of ICT in the curriculum has been unsatisfactory. As a result, schools with a high level of in-house ICT expertise have made reasonable progress, but those with less expertise have made insufficient progress.

74. The LEA has spread investment for the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) across all schools in each year of the programme, following consultation with the schools. High speed ICT connections are to be provided in the near future. SRB funding has provided further ICT resources for some schools. In primary and special schools, the ratio of pupils to computers is less favourable than the national average, but in secondary schools it is more favourable. The council's central purchasing department has assisted the purchase of equipment by schools. Flexible tendering arrangements have enabled schools to obtain value for money.

75. The LEA has developed an intranet link for all schools, which is known as VIPER (virtual interactive professional educational resource). Currently, VIPER can be accessed at home by teachers and will eventually be accessible to parents. It has the potential to provide good communication between the LEA and schools, but the use of VIPER by schools has been limited so far. Concerns by schools about its reliability have held up its use, although this situation is now improving. Many schools that have weaker ICT expertise are only just beginning to use on-line curriculum materials.

76. The ICT strategy sets out targets for improving ICT competence and for increasing the role of ICT within the broader curriculum, although few of the targets are sufficiently precise for measuring progress.

77. Until recently, guidance and advice to help schools improve their use of ICT in the curriculum were insufficient. The responses of both primary and secondary schools in the school survey were highly critical of the support for ICT. Since the appointment of an ICT adviser last September, support has improved and has been strengthened further by the appointment of an ICT consultant in January 2001. There are many schools that need considerable help to improve the ICT competence of their pupils and in the use of ICT throughout the curriculum. Little has so far been done to help primary schools use ICT in the literacy and numeracy strategies, but a very promising beginning has been made in making such materials available on the VIPER intranet.

78. The LEA has asked schools to produce ICT development plans and provided them with clear guidance. A well-constructed ICT training programme for the current school year has been prepared. However, little detail is provided about the level of ICT awareness necessary to benefit from individual courses, and a fuller and clearer statement of the aims of each course in the publicity material is needed. Although there has been no overall survey of levels of teachers' ICT competence and training needs, regular meetings of school ICT co-ordinators provide guidance to the LEA on the training needed and its suitability and effectiveness. Most schools have now

identified their New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training provider, and about three quarters have begun the training.

79. Administrative ICT developments in the authority are sound. Most schools have used a commercial financial and database package for ten years and report that their finance and administrative systems run smoothly. Most schools do not yet use additional packages such as Assessment Manager and the SEN database. The LEA support for these packages has been too limited. The authority is currently consulting on a management information strategy that will enable increased electronic communication between the LEA and schools to meet the DfEE targets for 2002. The infrastructure for electronic communication is in place through the VIPER intranet, but sections within the LEA and many individual schools are not yet using it.

80. Technical support to schools is currently fragmented between services provided by the council, a number of commercial contractors supporting VIPER and school hardware purchases, and a variety of consortium arrangements being developed between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. The local authority is about to go out to a European tender for a 'one-stop' ICT support service for schools.

### **Support for schools causing concern**

81. OFSTED inspections have found three primary schools to require special measures and three to have serious weaknesses. One of the latter was identified in June 2000, another has been closed and the others, in both categories, have improved enough to be removed from them. Until the formulation of St Helens' 'strategic statement on support and intervention' in the course of the last year, OFSTED's work with schools in these categories showed that the LEA's support had weaknesses in monitoring the schools' progress and in the quality of guidance given to them. The operation of the new policy has brought about radical change for the better. The work is now good and a strength of the LEA.

82. The new policy is enabling schools in its four categories of concern to receive support which is well adjusted to their needs. It is particularly successful in making clear to the schools and their governors what needs to be improved and who carries the responsibility for securing that improvement. In doing so it is establishing a good balance between support and intervention according to the needs of each school. In the case of the school presently causing the most serious concern the LEA has used its statutory power to issue a formal warning. Further up the scale, schools causing concern which are improving are moved progressively into lower categories of support so as to keep the degree of support proportionate to need and so as to promote the schools' autonomy.

83. Responsibility for deciding on the level of concern for any particular school rests with a cross-departmental monitoring group. This consists of the department's senior staff, chaired by the director and calls upon other officers, for example from the education welfare service or from management support services according to the needs of the school concerned. Having decided to assign a school to one of the categories of concern, the monitoring group sets up an action group, tailored to the needs of the school in question. The process is an effective one. The school

identified with serious weaknesses last summer was already a cause for concern to the LEA but its strategy for intervention had not had time to achieve its full effect.

### **Support for governors**

84. The support provided for governors is strong. The key to that strength, in the view of governors taking part in a group discussion and interviewed on school visits, is the readiness of education department officers to respond to the governors' requests for help. The clerking and training services are both traded. All governing bodies purchase the training service and governors have a high view of its quality. The purchase of the clerking service is at a lower level. Fifty per cent of secondary schools and seventy per cent of primary schools buy it. This low level of purchase is now rising. It dates back to a period when the LEA did not provide the service.

85. Communication between the education department and governors is good. It is facilitated through the governors' forum, the annual conference for all governors, the newsletter, the clerking service and the link governor system. These multiple channels of communication facilitate a major strength of the support service which is its use of the evaluative comments on the support made by the governors as a basis for improving the service.

86. A further major strength of the support is the work with the governing bodies of schools causing concern. This involves the appointment of effective governors, the provision of information and guidance for them and training sessions tailored specifically for the needs of the individual governing body.

### **Support for school management**

87. The LEA places a high priority on the development of school management and delivers satisfactory support through a wide variety of activities. These include regular meetings of headteachers and deputy headteachers with senior staff of the education department, the use of the national training schemes for serving and aspiring headteachers, primary and secondary headteachers' conferences, collaboration on management training with the local Chamber of Commerce, a programme of support for newly appointed headteachers, and the use of local expertise by, for example, establishing links between Beacon schools and schools causing concern. The regular link advisers' school visits are seen by the advisers and by the schools as contributing to management development.

88. The LEA's key strategy for developing school management, however, is to promote self-review. To this end the authority uses the OFSTED training on the topic and its own 'Kitemark' programme for early years. The LEA has had considerable success with raising managers' awareness of the value of self-review. The training for this work is traded; all secondary schools and 95 per cent of primary schools have purchased it. Discussion with a group of headteachers and the school visits both showed that there is a widespread conviction amongst school managers of the value of the activity. Many of them are in a strong position to begin on it because of the award of Investors in People status to their schools. The extent to which schools are actively involved in self-review, however, is varied and it is too soon to assess the effectiveness of the LEA's strategy in the matter. Nevertheless, it is clear that

schools' senior management is supported well by the LEA. By contrast the schools' middle managers are not well supported. The school visits revealed weakness in this respect.

89. The advisory service has made productive use of surveys in order to identify weaknesses in teaching and curriculum and, on the basis of the findings, has taken remedial action. It is able to show evidence of the success of this work, for example in foreign language teaching. The LEA's current programme of in-service training for teachers is a good one, but the school visits showed that schools need clearer information about the courses, and in particular about the particular target groups at which the courses are aimed, so as to be able to ensure that training is attended by those teachers most able to benefit from it. Newly qualified teachers are supported well and all the schools with such teachers purchase the LEA's support.

### **Support for early years**

90. The LEA provides effective support for early years education. St Helens has a history of making extensive provision for under-fives but, in the past, there have been weaknesses in it. These were revealed by inspection and by an Audit Commission report. In particular, curriculum planning was weak and children were being poorly prepared for entry to reception classes and for beginning work on the National Curriculum. The LEA set out to deal with these problems. It made raising standards of provision for under-fives the first priority of its EDP.

91. Much progress has been made. The early years development and childcare plan has been approved by the DfEE, as has a proposal for an early years excellence centre, due to open in September 2001. There have been two key elements to the progress which has been made. One is the development of the LEA's quality assurance Kitemark which has promoted self-review and improvement in the LEA's nursery schools and classes and which has also been taken up in voluntary and private sector settings. The other is the provision of curriculum planning documents, the use of which has helped schools to remedy the weaknesses identified by inspection. Schools visited regarded the support for early years very favourably.

92. The LEA's determined effort to improve this aspect of its work has transformed this formerly weak aspect of its support for school improvement into a considerable strength.

### **Recommendations**

#### **In order to support school improvement:**

- disseminate good practice among the schools by establishing, and making available, a register of it;
- ensure that schools make more use of performance data in their work of institutional improvement;
- improve support for schools' middle managers; and
- improve the curriculum support for information and communication technology by:

- developing the contents of the VIPER intranet and extending training in its use;
- identifying targets for improvement in ICT in schools that can be used to monitor progress and achievement more accurately;
- establishing a priority order of schools needing support in developing their use of ICT.

## **SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### **Corporate planning**

93. Corporate planning in St Helens is very good. The council has set a clear corporate goal of regeneration through the twin objectives of increasing social inclusion and raising educational attainment. These objectives are evident throughout corporate and departmental planning. There is a strong, shared view of regeneration held both by the members and staff of the council and their many partnership groups. The council is currently consulting on the 'St Helens strategy for social inclusion 2000-2003' that states clearly the council's objectives, identifies present work and the future contributions to be made to the strategy by council departments and partnership groups.

94. Education has a central place within the corporate strategy for regeneration. There is a high commitment given to education from elected members and their chief executive; they have a very good knowledge of the schools in the borough and their performance.

95. Overall, planning within the department of community education and leisure services is good. A three-year planning cycle is in operation; each major plan is reviewed annually within this cycle. A strategic plan for education (1998-2001) was being implemented in the authority before the national requirement was made to construct an Education Development Plan (EDP). The strategic plan is concise and contains six priorities derived from a thorough audit, clearly linked to the corporate objectives of raising attainment and social inclusion. It contains performance indicators and ambitious targets. The strategic plan is an important working document for the department and its priorities are reflected in other departmental plans, and particularly in the EDP. However, more recent plans are yet to be integrated fully into departmental and interdepartmental planning and not all departmental plans have sharp success criteria by which progress can be judged.

96. The monitoring of progress within the council and the department of community education and leisure services is good. The leader of the council monitors the work of each portfolio holder each month, using a range of performance indicators. Responsibilities of members and officers are clearly defined. Members receive good quality information and advice. There is a clear scheme of delegation to chief officers that includes satisfactory arrangements to check decisions. The components for a system of performance management are in place but have not yet been developed into a formal system. An appraisal system is in operation within the department of community education and leisure services. Targets are set for staff based upon strategic plans, but Best Value performance indicators for monitoring purposes are yet to be widely used across the department.

97. The department of community education and leisure services is one of six departments of the council. The present director of community education and leisure services was appointed in July 2000 and reports directly to the chief executive. The department has two assistant directors; the senior assistant director leads on forward planning, capital and strategy whilst the other assistant director leads on community services, leisure, libraries and family learning. The council's head of recreation

joined the departmental senior management team in September 2000. The three senior advisers each report directly to the director of community education and leisure services and have wider management responsibilities than is usual for an adviser. The senior adviser (primary) manages developments in early years, the senior adviser (secondary) manages the youth service, whilst the senior adviser (special educational needs) manages the SEN support services and the pupil referral service and also has considerable responsibilities for the new SEN strategy. This tripartite arrangement for the management of the advisory service works well. At present, the multiple responsibilities do not distract the officers from their advisory duties.

98. The structure reflects the high priority and strong leadership given by the previous director to raising attainment through school improvement. At present, the structure is effective and has contributed to the increased challenge presented to schools that has been evident over the last four years. Since the departure of the previous director to another authority, the department has continued to be well led, initially by an acting director and subsequently by the present director. In the schools visited during the inspection, there was strong support expressed for the current management team within the department, and the open, consultative approach being adopted.

99. The range of priorities to be addressed within the department is growing and changing, placing inevitable pressures upon the structure. The implementation of the new strategy for special educational needs presents significant challenges to ensure that inclusion develops progressively throughout all aspects and phases of the LEA's school improvement work. There is now the new, but complementary, development of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative to integrate within the existing work of the department. With the development of leisure functions within the department, aspects of that work now appear within three posts in the senior management team. The recent appointment of a new director presents a natural opportunity to review the work and structure of the department.

100. Consultation and communication between the department and its schools have improved in recent years. The new director has consulted headteachers and published a regular pattern of headteachers' meetings. Representative headteachers meet every six weeks as the director's consultative forum, members of which report back to their constituent groups. This is a very satisfactory arrangement and ensures good communication and consultation with the staff responsible for improvement in the LEA's schools. Secondary headteachers interviewed during the inspection commended the consultation and collaborative planning between the LEA and schools in constructing the EiC bid.

### **Partnership with external agencies and other local government departments**

101. Strategic partnerships within the borough are of a very high quality and demonstrate excellent commitment, co-operation and trust by all the participants. The corporate objective of regeneration has been advanced significantly by the private/public partnership, Ravenhead Renaissance, which is run as a company limited by guarantee at arm's length from the council. It has attracted over £50 million of urban regeneration funding to the area in the last 6 years and has been

highly successful in meeting its objectives. A significant amount of this funding has been used within education, particularly to develop ICT and family learning. There is a very high degree of co-operation between the partners to enable each partner to lead on aspects of regeneration most related to their expertise.

102. There is an equally high degree of trust and respect between partners evident in the St Helens learning partnership, which promotes life long learning in St Helens and is chaired by the director of community education and leisure services. The LEA provides the lead within the partnership for family learning. Family learning is focused upon literacy, numeracy, ICT and pre-school learning and provides good links within the LEA's strategic plan and the EDP. The partnership develops opportunities for life long learning that not only reflect the needs of the community but also uses effectively the expertise held by specific partners. Life long learning is developed by the partnership in an open, objective and flexible way and avoids duplication of provision.

103. There is good liaison at departmental level between the department of community education and leisure services and the department of social services, the St Helens and Knowsley health trust and Merseyside police. A pilot project is operating at one of the high schools in which personnel from all these agencies are working with pupils at risk from behaviour or poor attendance. This project is one example of the strong partnership development of personal, social and health education that contributes to the corporate strategy of social inclusion.

104. There is also strong partnership with other groups, including the two dioceses. The Chamber of Commerce has arranged a business link for every school in St Helens and all schools are members of the Chamber. The Chamber has assisted a significant number of St Helens schools to achieve Investors in People status (IiP). At the time of the inspection, IiP had been awarded to 25 per cent of primary schools, 40 per cent of secondary schools and 50 per cent of special schools.

### **Management services**

105. The council has not yet developed a wide range of flexible agreements for the purchase of its services. The personnel and finance functions and some areas of school improvement have had agreements for some time; other services have developed agreements more recently. As a result, many schools in St Helens have not gained sufficient experience in purchasing services. Overall, schools consider that they receive good services and that their first priority is to concentrate on school improvement.

106. **Financial support services** to schools are very good. Schools value the support provided by finance officers on budget planning. All schools have cheque book accounts and individual school accounting packages work efficiently. Financial support services monitor their own achievement against a wide range of targets, including the production of indicative budgets, reconciliation and closure of accounts, and indicators of customer satisfaction. Services for financial support give good value for money.

107. There are no significant problems with budget deficits. One school has a small licensed deficit, which has arisen because of the short-term effect of increases in pupil numbers. In April 2000, cumulative surpluses were £4 million, around six per cent of the Local Schools Budget. The levels of surpluses are too high in many schools. Schools are required to account for surpluses of greater than five per cent. Finance officers are now starting to work more closely with link advisers to require schools to provide clearer proposals for the use of surpluses.

108. **Personnel support services** provided to schools are very good. Schools are surveyed about the quality of the service. In particular, schools value the support that they receive on difficult personnel issues. Sickness absence monitoring procedures are in place. Payroll services are linked with personnel services and operate efficiently. Personnel support services give good value for money.

109. The **school meals service** is broadly satisfactory, but some schools feel that there is room for improvement in the range and quality of meals. Under a third of primary pupils who are not eligible for free meals actually purchase one. This is a lower percentage than the average for metropolitan authorities.

110. The quality of the **caretaking and cleaning services** provided by the council's direct services organisation (DSO) varies between schools, primarily relating to the individuals employed and the quality of supervision provided.

111. The **grounds maintenance service** has improved in recent years. The service has become more responsive and flexible to meet the needs of individual schools. The school survey showed that primary and secondary schools judge the service to be satisfactory or better.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to strengthen strategic management:**

- improve monitoring and evaluation through the implementation of a formal system of performance management; and
- improve support services by developing flexible service agreements that specify the levels, standards and costs of services and facilitate evaluation.

## **SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION**

### **Strategy**

112. A strategic plan for special educational needs (2000-3) was approved by the council in April 2000. It demonstrates a clear commitment to inclusion and reflects the corporate objective of regeneration by raising attainment and social inclusion. The direction given by the strategic plan is good. It is based upon the results of a pilot Best Value review and it takes full account of the Government's programme of action.

113. The aims of the strategy and the milestones by which progress can be judged are clearly defined. The plan is subject to regular monitoring by elected members and senior officers. However, operational details for the implementation of the strategy are contained in various other plans and depend greatly upon central co-ordination for success. These plans are not yet securely embedded within management structures in the LEA. As a result, the details of the implementation of the strategy are not clear in all schools.

114. The LEA has made significant progress in a short time in implementing the strategy, whilst continuing to manage the effects of the previous policy that relied on a very high level of statementing and out of borough placements. The overall level of statements in 1998 was five per cent. The LEA has set targets to reduce the number of statements. In 2000, 3.3 per cent of primary aged pupils had a statement of special educational need, which is approaching the LEA target of three per cent for 2000/01 but above the current national average of 2.7 per cent. The level of statementing for secondary aged pupils remains high at 5.6 per cent compared to the national rate of 4.0 per cent as the LEA continues to maintain a large number of long-standing statements. The LEA now has a satisfactory approach overall for ceasing to maintain statements. A very high proportion of new statements indicate placement within mainstream schools and the number of pupils with statements placed in maintained mainstream or special schools is now close to the national average. The number of out-of-borough placements has been almost halved in the last two years but total expenditure on these placements remains high and is almost twice the metropolitan borough average.

115. The LEA is continuing to consult schools on the strategic plan for SEN. It is committed to support and develop the capability of schools to manage SEN for their pupils. The LEA has provided both challenge and support to schools for key issues such as the writing and review of individual education plans (IEP) and target-setting. Satisfactory training is provided in a range of settings to support the development and implementation of the strategy. In all the schools visited during the inspection, there was wide support for the principles of the strategic plan and a recognition of the school's responsibilities to manage special educational needs for their pupils.

### **Statutory obligations**

116. The LEA meets its statutory duties well. Eighty three per cent of statements are issued within 18 weeks; ninety-five per cent are completed within the department in that time, whilst awaiting advice from other agencies. There are challenging

performance indicators for Best Value. The statements scrutinised during the inspection were of good quality. A satisfactory number of clearly prioritised statutory annual review meetings are attended by LEA staff in maintained and independent schools. A designated team monitors these for pupil progress and for the quality of the process and outcomes. The LEA has introduced clear criteria for initiating statutory assessments.

### **Improvement and value for money**

117. Overall, support for school improvement is satisfactory. In sixteen of the eighteen schools visited during the inspection, support for SEN was judged to be satisfactory or better.

118. In many of the schools visited, there is concern about the speed at which the strategy is being implemented with the result that senior staff are not clear about the expected impact upon their schools. The LEA does not yet have sufficiently explicit and differentiated strategies for support that recognise the different stages of preparedness for inclusion in the schools.

119. The work of the recently appointed inclusion officers for support and monitoring has been welcomed in the schools that have received visits. Examples of support include assisting staff in writing IEPs and advising on bids for 'Support Plus' for pupils at stage 3 of the Code of Practice. However, in schools that have not yet received a visit, the role of the inclusion officers is less clear to staff. From the visits made to schools during the inspection, it is apparent that the work of the inclusion officers is beginning to make a significant and positive impact upon the development of the LEA's strategy for SEN.

120. The LEA has been slow to establish an independent parent partnership scheme but its recent development is on sound lines and early indicators are positive. There is good parental involvement in developing related initiatives such as the parent forum meetings.

121. Expenditure on SEN is higher than the average in similar LEAs. Elected members and senior officers have made a positive and valuable commitment to maintain the budget for SEN and redirect resources progressively from central provision for statements and out of borough placements and into delegated school budgets to support the development of inclusion. Most of the funding available for both statutory and non-statutory provision is delegated. In the last two years, the LEA has implemented a clear, monitored system of 'Support Plus' funding for pupils at stage 3 of the Code of Practice to complement a well established, although less well monitored, formula for social inclusion and additional educational needs. The work of the inclusion officers includes the monitoring of funds delegated to schools for SEN.

122. The LEA has satisfactory arrangements for monitoring pupil progress. Target-setting has been established. There is some innovative development work in progress to link P scales with key stage assessments in order to develop further target setting and the monitoring of pupil progress. This work will also assist the evaluation of the use of SEN funding.

123. Services for SEN are well managed and are effective. There are sound quality assurance measures in place. The pupil referral service, although relatively recently formed, and the work of the inclusion officers are giving good support to schools. Schools value the support given by educational psychologists, in particular the opportunity to plan with them their use of time in the school. Services for the sensory impaired are of good quality. Learning support is generally obtained by the appointment of learning support assistants in schools, funded from delegated resources. The LEA has provided appropriate training for these staff. Special educational needs co-ordinators are well informed through the LEA about local and national developments and have access to a wide range of training, including accredited courses in higher education.

124. The LEA has established a sound strategy for SEN that promotes inclusion and early intervention through delegated funding, a planned reduction in statements, and a more effective use of existing SEN support. Procedures for the monitoring of delegated funding and pupil progress are now in place. These developments, whilst satisfactory, are relatively new. The LEA has the capacity to develop further its SEN provision. Overall, value for money is satisfactory.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve provision for special educational needs:**

- ensure that schools are clear about the expected impact of the SEN strategy on the school;
- develop a differentiated approach to challenging and supporting schools that recognises their stage of preparation for managing SEN and inclusion in the school; and
- develop systems for evaluating the progress of pupils and the use of all delegated SEN funding both at school and LEA levels.

## **SECTION 5: ACCESS**

### **The supply of school places**

125. The LEA has taken positive and effective action to manage the supply of places in the primary sector. The birth rate in St Helens fell by 14 per cent between 1992 and 1999. Families have moved out of the less popular areas. Twenty primary schools have been closed since 1990. Work has been carried out to use surplus capacity for community facilities, dedicated ICT rooms, library areas and pre-school settings. Currently, there are 11 per cent surplus places in primary schools, the majority of which are in the aided sector. Nine primary schools have over 25 per cent surplus places each. The council has begun a further programme of area reviews of primary provision.

126. There are 7.5 per cent surplus places in the secondary sector; no school has over 25 per cent of surplus places. This is below the average for metropolitan authorities, but the number of secondary aged pupils will start to decline in the next few years. There is considerable variation in the popularity of individual secondary schools in the borough. That not only raises issues of longer-term viability for some schools, but is also affecting pupil recruitment and retention in some of the feeder primary schools. The combination of fewer secondary aged pupils and parental preferences for secondary schools will result in a significant number of surplus places in some areas of the borough if action is not taken.

127. Five community schools and one aided school have sixth forms; of these, one community school and the aided school operate joint arrangements for sixth form provision. The St Helens learning partnership is to review post-16 provision in the area during this year.

128. The school organisation plan is very sound. The LEA has demonstrated its commitment to tackle surplus places in the light of a declining pupil population.

### **Admissions**

129. The LEA efficiently manages admissions to nurseries, to all primary and secondary community schools and, by agreement, to many of the voluntary aided schools where there are pressures on places. Admissions information provided by the LEA for parents is timely and of good quality. It meets the standards of the Code of Practice on Admissions.

130. The LEA operates a satisfactory system of admissions based upon associated primary schools linked to each secondary school. However, parental preferences for secondary schools and the resultant movement of primary aged pupils affect the efficacy of the system in areas of the borough where secondary schools are less popular. In previous years, admission arrangements were completed by the end of March and appeals determined by early June. The process has been moved forward for 2001 and will be completed by the end of February with appeals determined by the end of April. The number of appeals per thousand pupils in 1998/99 was just below the average for metropolitan authorities in both primary and secondary sectors.

## **Asset management planning**

131. The LEA has exercised good stewardship over the condition of school buildings. It provides good quality technical support services to schools and has met the DfEE deadlines for submission of asset management planning information. The recent DfEE assessment showed that there are very effective arrangements with local partners for consultation, assessing premises and determining priorities.

132. The level of investment in school buildings has been maintained throughout the 1990s and there has been a regular preventive maintenance programme. The condition survey indicated that the backlog of repairs and maintenance in the two highest priority categories was relatively low at £2.4 million. In 2000/01, this figure was reduced by £1.0 million as a result of additional work carried out and the LEA expects to complete the remaining work in 2001/02.

133. The LEA has provided good information to all schools on their individual asset management plans and guidance on the use of formula capital resources. The LEA has a clear view of suitability issues in its schools. There is a consultative forum with schools on asset management that considers draft programmes for investment.

134. The LEA operates a pooling arrangement for delegated repairs and maintenance; all but one school buy into this arrangement. Technical support is provided by surveyors assigned to the education department. Schools visited during the inspection were positive about the quality of technical support that they received. For major building contracts, the council provides design services, but some schools are concerned about the speed of service that they receive. The council has developed an innovative partnership approach with contractors in order to secure good value for money in the design and construction of new school buildings.

## **Attendance**

135. Expenditure on the education welfare service in St Helens is about two-thirds of the average for metropolitan authorities. The support for attendance overall is sound and provides satisfactory value for money.

136. The level of attendance in primary and secondary schools has been close to the national average and to the average for similar LEAs over the last three years. Both primary and secondary attendance has shown a year on year improvement in line with the national rate. Levels of unauthorised absence in both primary and secondary schools until 1999 were about half of the equivalents nationally and for similar LEAs, although in 2000 the rate of unauthorised absence recorded in secondary schools increased, in part because of difficulties with a computer registration system introduced in some schools. In both primary and secondary schools, authorised absence was higher in most years than the national average and the average in similar LEAs. There is considerable variation in attendance rates between schools.

137. The attendance policy sets out a sound strategy for achieving attendance targets. Pupils with the most serious absence problems are monitored regularly by the additional needs monitoring group (ANMG). Most schools have been successful in reducing the scale of unauthorised absence, but are finding it difficult to make similar progress in reducing authorised absences. Several report that this is in part due to families taking holidays during school term times. This is supported by the findings of the ANMG, which is considering ways of reducing authorised absence.

138. The restructuring of the education welfare service (EWS) has resulted in a number of improved practices. The amount of education welfare officer (EWO) time allocated to each school is based on a study of its needs. Individual contracts with schools specify what the service intends to provide. These contracts enable schools to evaluate what the service provides and to specify performance expectations for EWOs. Schools provide regular evaluations as part of performance management of the EWS. There is effective liaison with neighbouring LEAs for work with extra-district pupils, and the attendance of pupils at independent special schools is checked regularly. As part of the EiC development, discussions are taking place with secondary schools, involving both EWOs and link advisers, about individual school attendance targets.

### **Behaviour support**

139. The quality of the support provided for schools in dealing with children with behaviour problems is good, and represents sound value for money. The behaviour support plan contains many deficiencies, resulting from its preparation before the LEA had clarified its strategy on several key features of behaviour support. In spite of this, the strategy now operating is well conceived and is having a very positive effect. Permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and special schools have reduced in each of the last five years and the number excluded in 1999-2000, 23 pupils, was less than half the number in 1995-96. This is significantly lower than both the national average and that for similar LEAs. Targets set out in the EDP are low and those in the EiC plan even lower: these targets have already been achieved and exceeded.

140. The pupil referral service (PRS) is a multi-disciplinary service. It is led effectively by a headteacher who is also head of the two pupil referral units (PRUs). The PRS is staffed by an advisory teacher, a child guidance worker, two family support workers, part of the time of an educational psychologist together with teachers, youth workers and nursery nurses who provide outreach support in schools. One secondary school already has a learning support unit and, as part of the EiC initiative, additional units are to be established at a further four secondary schools.

141. Each school has a nominated link teacher from the service, who maintains contact with the school, provides in-school support to individual pupils when needed and organises staff training if requested. The training covers behaviour management, classroom management and bullying, and is customised to the particular circumstances and needs of the school. In addition, training in behaviour management is provided in the centre-based staff development programme.

142. The procedure for referring pupils to the PRS is good. Referrals are considered by the allocation panel, which can be observed by the referring school. Cases are presented anonymously, and may be either referred back to the school with advice on additional strategies, or accepted for further investigation leading to a decision about how best support can be provided. In determining the strategy to be used, care is taken to separate learning and behavioural difficulties. Review dates are set, an IEP is prepared and, where a placement in a PRU is determined, a strategy either to return the child to full-time school education or, in the case of older pupils, a plan for post-school activity is considered from the outset. The allocation process is effective and has the confidence and support of the majority of schools.

143. The LEA maintains two PRUs. The primary assessment centre (PACE) works with pupils in Key Stages 2 and 3. The Launchpad Suite, closely linked with St Helens College and housed in part of its building, works with those in Key Stage 4. Each makes provision both for pupils who have been permanently excluded from school and for those allocated by the PRS through the allocation procedure. Both have been inspected by OFSTED in recent months and were found to have more strengths than weaknesses.

144. Pupils attending PACE as a result of school referral do so full-time for the first two weeks, and then move to three days per week at PACE and two days in their own school. Allocations are in most cases set at a maximum of two terms; unless there are special reasons, the pupils then resume full-time education in school. All Key Stage 2 pupils are re-integrated into schools before transfer to secondary school. Until recently, the lack of provision for pupils in Key Stage 3 has been a weakness, but this is now being remedied and unused places in PACE are being utilised. By September 2001 the LEA plans to make full-time provision for these pupils.

145. For Key Stage 4 pupils allocated to the Launchpad Suite, it is not a normal expectation that they will return to mainstream schools. They follow a core subjects and skills curriculum for half the week and, for the remainder, follow either a vocational course provided by the college, or a work experience placement arranged through a training agency, or a combination of the two. Careers advisers work closely with them in the latter stages of the course.

146. The PRUs are organised as part of the PRS, giving a continuum of provision for pupils with behaviour problems. This is a good arrangement that provides considerable flexibility in responding to the needs of pupils, parents and schools.

### **Provision of education otherwise than at school**

147. Arrangements for pupils educated other than at school are good and provide satisfactory value for money. The LEA's information about them is full and detailed, and their attainment, progress and well being is carefully monitored by the ANMG. Officers have a good knowledge of the individuals and their circumstances. The LEA is already very close to the target of providing full-time education for all children without school places, and steps are being taken to narrow this gap still further.

148. An officer, who is chair of the ANMG, serves as first point of contact for schools considering an exclusion. He ensures that the school has considered the alternatives available and provides detailed guidance on the steps they need to have taken. He attends the governors meetings and the appeals panel if required. Training is provided by the LEA for appeal panel members.

149. Provision for the majority of pupils without school places is made in the two PRUs, alongside other pupils who are on the rolls of both PRU and their school. At the time of the inspection, there were no Key Stage 2 pupils who had been permanently excluded from school. Using places available at PACE, three excluded pupils in Key Stage 3 were being taught there for 15 hours per week. A small number of excluded pupils in Key Stage 4 attending the Launchpad Suite had not yet been allocated to vocational courses in the college, but were being taught for a core curriculum of 12.5 hours per week. The College also houses a group of persistent non-attenders in Key Stage 4, with up to eight places available, and a further group consisting of pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers, although the LEA is seeking alternative arrangement for these pupils so that they can continue their education at school.

150. At the time of the inspection, 17 pupils were receiving individual tuition for health reasons. Those of primary age receive six hours per week, while those of secondary age have eight hours and ten hours in Year 11. The service keeps close contact with the schools and, wherever possible, ensures continuity of learning. Seventeen pupils were being educated at home at parental choice. Advisers visit at intervals. The LEA provides guidance and help to parents, including a clearly written pamphlet that sets out the implications of choosing this route and the requirements that have to be met.

### **Health, safety, welfare, child protection**

151. The LEA has satisfactory procedures to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of pupils, members of staff and others with access to its buildings, and fulfils its statutory obligations with regard to these matters. A health and safety policy statement has been prepared and circulated to schools and suitable measures have been taken to provide means of controlling entrance to school buildings.

152. Child protection arrangements are a particular strength of the authority. The adviser for pupil support and development is responsible for the co-ordination and oversight of child protection and represents the LEA on the area child protection committee. Links between the education and social services departments and with other agencies and services concerned with the well-being of children are strong. Activities overall are co-ordinated by the St Helens childrens' services co-ordinating group.

153. In the schools' survey, 90 per cent of primary schools and all secondary schools reported the quality of advice on child protection matters as good or very good. All schools have a designated child protection co-ordinator and the LEA maintains an up-to-date list of these and the training they have undertaken. Steps are taken to ensure that training is suitably updated. The child protection handbook issued to all schools is very comprehensive and clear. Schools receive a termly

update of children on the child protection register and the relevant contents of the child protection plan.

### **Children in public care**

154. The authority successfully fulfils its responsibilities for children in public care. The good communication and co-operation between services that has been developed in the context of child protection is now leading to improved co-operation in supporting children in public care. The department of community education and leisure services and the department of social services have safeguarded access to each other's database of looked-after children. Although some schools report that they have too little contact with the social workers responsible for the children, there is evidence of improved co-operation in supporting these children and promoting their educational attainment.

155. About one-fifth of the children of school age in public care are in out-of-borough placements and attend schools in other LEAs, including some residential schools. The LEA's inclusion officers check the suitability of the educational programme offered to these children. The LEA provides and updates relevant information to all schools that have children in public care on roll, both within and outside the LEA. There are no children in public care who are without a school place.

156. The attainment of children in public care is carefully monitored by the LEA's educational attainment task group. Good progress is being made towards the targets set out in the EDP. For GCSE, these targets are somewhat higher than those indicated by the Government, while the Key Stage 2 and 3 targets are similar. The percentage gaining at least one graded result at GCSE has increased each year since 1998. Results in 2000 exceeded the target for 2001, and the prospects of achieving the target of 75 per cent by 2002 are very reasonable. However, the number attaining higher grades in GCSE as well as those attaining Level 4 and better at the end of Key Stage 2 continues to be disproportionately low.

157. Training is provided to raise teachers' awareness of the educational and welfare needs of looked after children through suitable courses in the staff development programme and through contributions made by the PRS and the education psychology service to staff training days.

### **Support for pupils of minority ethnic heritage, including Travellers**

158. The number of pupils from minority ethnic groups in St Helens is one per cent of the school age population and drawn from a wide diversity of groups. Of these, less than a third need support in English as an additional language, which is provided by a small central team. In addition, the Traveller education service provides support for Traveller children, nearly all of them in primary schools. Both services provide good support to schools, but the Local Authority does not ensure that Traveller children on unauthorised or temporary sites are assessed. Value for money, overall, is satisfactory.

159. The LEA has a good knowledge of these pupils. Their attainment, progress and school attendance are regularly monitored by the ANMG. While the small numbers make exact comparison difficult and result in year-to-year fluctuations, the overall attainment of minority ethnic pupils, measured by the use of QCA tests and end of Key Stage assessments, is close to that for all pupils. The ethnic minorities and Travellers achievement grant (EMTAG) action plan sets appropriate targets for attainment and outlines a suitable range of strategies to enhance this.

160. Traveller pupils are well supported in nursery schools and classes and in primary schools. Assessment of their needs is sound and suitable programmes of work are planned for those needing additional support. Attendance difficulties are followed up by an EWO who visits the sites as needed. However, too little is done to ensure that children of Traveller families using unauthorised or temporary sites have access to schools or have a sufficiently thorough assessment of their educational needs and, in this respect, the LEA is not fulfilling its statutory duty. Very few of the pupils completing primary school register for a place in a secondary school in St Helens, and insufficient steps are taken to check on whether these pupils are in school at the secondary phase.

161. Many schools with experience of the support for minority ethnic children including Travellers describe the support provided as good or very good. Until recently, little has been done to encourage and help schools to understand and support the distinctive cultures of pupils of minority ethnic groups, although some schools have undertaken work of this kind on their own initiative. A recent conference on social inclusion organised by the LEA included workshops for teachers on a wide range of topics, including multi-cultural education and supporting Traveller pupils. Most secondary schools now make provision for pupils whose first language is not English to enter for GCSE in their mother tongue. Overall, value for money is satisfactory.

### **Gifted and talented pupils**

162. Support for gifted and talented pupils is a developing area of the LEA's work. There have been a number of initiatives in the past involving, for example, thinking skills in science and, last year, summer schools for able pupils. These activities have not been part of a co-ordinated programme of support but they are now being gathered together as part of the LEA's EiC work and all secondary schools have now designated a teacher to co-ordinate work with able pupils and produced draft policies to develop the work further.

### **Measures taken to combat racism**

163. The LEA has clear policies on equality of opportunity and combating racism and has taken sound action on the recommendations of the *Report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence* (Macpherson report, 1999). Schools know the importance of logging all incidents and reporting them to the LEA complaints officer. Reports are considered by advisers and followed up with a visit to the school if the incident appears significant. Guidance on assessing the significance of potentially racist incidents and the action to be taken has been provided. This is sensitive and well conceived and has been well received by schools. It includes a very useful

step-by-step analysis to help teachers judge the seriousness of the incident and the action needed. All schools are reported to have anti-racism policies, for which the LEA has provided further guidance.

## **Social exclusion**

164. There is a strong commitment to social inclusion in St Helens that runs throughout the council's plans and activities. The council is currently consulting on a new three-year strategy for inclusion. The council and its partners have been particularly successful in obtaining regeneration funding for the area.

165. The LEA provides a programme of family learning to increase skills and to encourage support for childrens' learning at home. The EiC initiative is establishing two small Education Action Zones in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Personal, health and social education (PHSE) is a major strand within the work of the LEA to reduce social exclusion. The LEA produces very good guidance for schools on the teaching and content of PHSE, much of it produced in co-operation with other services and agencies. The national healthy schools standard is being implemented in a third of St Helens' schools in which accreditation is offered for aspects of pupil welfare and development. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs is reducing out-of-borough placements and supporting inclusion by a redistribution of SEN resources to schools. Support for behaviour in schools is strong and the level of permanent exclusions has fallen sharply.

166. The LEA is making a significant contribution to the reduction of social exclusion in St Helens by addressing successfully the corporate objectives of raising of educational attainment and by the development of social inclusion.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve access to education:**

- plan to reduce the future provision of secondary school places;
- intensify efforts to reduce the rate of authorised absence in schools;
- ensure that the proposed extension of PRU provision for pupils in Key Stage 3 is implemented;
- ensure that the educational needs of Traveller children whose families do not make use of authorised sites are properly assessed and that they are admitted to school as soon as possible after their arrival in the borough; and
- ensure that Traveller children of secondary school age attend school.

## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **In order to strengthen the strategy for school improvement:**

- improve the EDP by establishing clear links between audit, priorities, activities and outcomes, and set sharp criteria by which to judge success.

### **In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:**

- ensure that schools understand the criteria for the use of additional sources of funding, the methods of allocation of the funding and the relationship between the use of these funds and the school's delegated budget; and
- make clear to schools the intended purpose of funding that is delegated for the social factor and the additional educational needs factors.

### **In order to support school improvement:**

- disseminate good practice among the schools by establishing, and making available, a register of it;
- ensure that schools make more use of performance data in their work of institutional improvement;
- improve support for schools' middle managers; and
- improve the curriculum support for ICT by:
  - developing the contents of the VIPER intranet and extending training in its use;
  - identifying targets for improvement in ICT in schools that can be used to monitor progress and achievement more accurately;
  - establishing a priority order of schools needing support in developing their use of ICT.

### **In order to strengthen strategic management:**

- improve monitoring and evaluation through the implementation of a formal system of performance management; and
- improve support services by developing flexible service agreements that specify the levels, standards and costs of services and facilitate evaluation.

### **In order to improve provision for special educational needs:**

- ensure that schools are clear about the expected impact of the SEN strategy on the school;
- develop a differentiated approach to challenging and supporting schools that recognises their stage of preparation for managing SEN and inclusion in the school; and
- develop systems for evaluating the progress of pupils and the use of all delegated SEN funding both at school and LEA levels.

### **In order to improve access to education:**

- plan to reduce the future provision of secondary school places;
- intensify efforts to reduce the rate of authorised absence in schools;
- ensure that the proposed extension of PRU provision for pupils in Key Stage 3 is implemented;
- ensure that the educational needs of Traveller children whose families do not make use of authorised sites are properly assessed and that they are admitted to school as soon as possible after their arrival in the borough; and
- ensure that Traveller children of secondary school age attend school.

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