

**Inspection report**  
**STOKE-ON-TRENT**  
**Local Education Authority**

Date of inspection: June 2003

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## **Basic information**

Name of LEA:	Stoke-on-Trent Local Education Authority
Address of LEA:	Education and Lifelong Learning Department Civic Centre Floor 2 Glebe Street Stoke-on-Trent ST4 1HH
Lead inspector:	Brian Sharples HMI
Date of inspection:	June 2003

## Introduction

1. This inspection of Stoke-on-Trent local education authority (LEA) 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 (December 2001)*. The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the LEA's 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 a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports; audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers; staff in other departments at the local authority; diocesan representatives; and a range of LEA partners. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in July 1999). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 116 schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 72 per cent.
  3. For each inspected function of the LEA, an inspection team makes a judgement, which is converted into a numerical grade. An inspection team may make up to 52 key inspection judgements. An inspection judgement is made against criteria for each inspected function of the LEA. These criteria (and the guidance notes on functions of an LEA that may be inspected by Ofsted), can be found on the Ofsted website. The numerical grades awarded for the judgements made in this inspection are appended to this report, along with short explanations of what each numeric grade represents. Judgements on inspected functions of an LEA are made during the inspection of the LEA and indicate the effectiveness of the LEA's performance of individual functions at the time of the inspection. The numeric grades awarded by the inspection team complement the areas of the report which comment on the individual functions scrutinised on this inspection, and, as such, must be considered in the light of those comments.
  4. Some of the grades are used in the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) profile for the education service. It is intended that the CPA for education will be updated annually so the grades from this inspection will contribute to the next annual assessment.
  5. The CPA for the education service takes account of the performance of several aspects of the local service, including pre-school and adult education. The CPA for education is composed of a number of inspection judgements, as well as other performance indicators, such as improvement trends at Key Stage 3. The assessment, published in December 2002, gives star ratings for each local authority for a range of local services, for example social services, benefits, environment etc, whereas this report focuses on the local authority's work to support school improvement.
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## Commentary

6. Stoke-on-Trent city council serves an area with a long and proud history associated with the pottery industry, but now the population and local economy are experiencing decline. On the Indices of Local Deprivation Stoke ranks in the top 10 per cent of the 354 districts nationally. There is a slow migration from the area of people seeking employment elsewhere while at the same time the annual birth rate has remained static for the last four years. The city is geographically well positioned between the North West and Midlands but also has a major challenge competing with the economic and cultural attractions of two major cities in Birmingham and Manchester.

7. Since the last inspection, performance has improved at rates which are faster than or in line with national averages. However because of inconsistent rates of improvement and the low standards of attainment from which to make progress, the performance of schools is unsatisfactory. Standards for all subjects in Key Stages 1 to 3 are lower than those nationally with the exception of mathematics and science at Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 4 the proportion of pupils achieving one or more A\*-G and five or more A\*-G passes is in line with national averages, but for five or more A\*-C's it remains below.

8. At the last inspection, in 1999, the LEA had been working as a unitary authority for two years and was still having to address the inherited issues. In that inspection the overall effectiveness of the LEA was satisfactory, but over a third of its functions were unsatisfactory or poor. The previous report identified significant weaknesses in provision for special educational needs (SEN), social inclusion, school improvement strategy and aspects of corporate planning.

9. Since then, the overall progress made by the LEA is good, and no area is now less than satisfactory. Improvements have been made in some key areas. The level of funding to the authority has increased. The school improvement strategy is now highly satisfactory and the support provided by the achievement division is good. Partnerships with schools have developed and the relationship between them and the LEA is now good. Schools have confidence in the senior officers and the guidance they provide. Other improvements include corporate planning and services to support school management, especially financial and human resource services, which are now very good.

10. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme, which will ensure that all maintained schools within the city will be rebuilt or refurbished by 2005, is a much needed and well-targeted initiative and represents a good example of effective partnership.

For those functions inspected there are particular strengths in:

- monitoring, intervention and challenge and the support to areas of greatest need;
  - use of performance data;
  - support for numeracy;
  - collaboration between several agencies;
  - the effectiveness of the LEA's services to support school management;
  - support for financial services, human resources, property services, cleaning and catering;
  - assuring the supply and quality of teachers;
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- asset management planning;
- school admissions;
- school attendance;
- leadership of the education and lifelong learning department;
- the standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement; and
- advice to elected members.

11. All of the LEA functions are at least satisfactory. Nevertheless, some major challenges remain in important areas of LEA support, including the implementation of the SEN strategy, aspects of social inclusion including behaviour, developing schools' support for inclusion and raising the standards of attainment in schools. Addressing these areas is key to increasing the impact and effectiveness of the LEA.

12. All of the major corporate plans rightly give a priority to regeneration. The council acknowledges the important role that education has to play in regeneration, and regeneration will be important to raising standards in Stoke. The foundation for and successful delivery of this vision are assisted by the strong partnerships, good quality planning and ability to attract the necessary funding. These factors alone will not ensure the agenda is achieved. The recent Audit Commission's Corporate Assessment report shows that the successful implementation and achievement of corporate priorities vary across the council. Within the context of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), education was awarded two stars for performance and three stars for capacity to improve (with three being the highest category in both cases).

13. The LEA's capacity to improve is judged` highly satisfactory which is slightly below the CPA judgment. It has the capacity to address the recommendations of this report. The LEA has moved a long way since the last inspection, thanks largely to the strong strategic direction provided by the director of education. He has provided clear and committed leadership and direct management of a number of functions. This has been effective but is a high risk strategy because the strategic management is heavily dependent on one person. This situation, in part, contributes to the capacity judgement.

14. The effectiveness of the LEA is now highly satisfactory, which is in line with the CPA's judgement for education performance.

## **Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement**

### **Context**

15. The socio-economic context of Stoke-on-Trent has worsened slightly since the last inspection. The authority is suffering a narrow and declining manufacturing base, a deteriorating environment, a low skill/low wage economy, and a culture of low attainment and aspiration among large sections of the population. The picture is one of gradual and continual decline. The challenges facing the council are enormous and will only be resolved through complete devotion and a united approach to the regeneration and partnership working which underlies the determined implementation of council planning.

16. Employment has continued to decline sharply and unemployment at 3.4 per cent is running slightly above the national average. The government has created a Regeneration Zone for North Staffordshire in response to concerns over the failing economy. They also proposed the establishment of a housing market renewal pathfinder scheme, to be led by the city to prevent the collapse of the housing market in certain North Staffordshire localities.

17. The resident population is approximately 240,000. The population of the city is beginning to decline. Twenty per cent of the population are aged under 16, 59 per cent between 16 and 59 and remainder over 60. The birth rate reached its lowest point ever in 2000 at around 2,750 births and has remained at this level to the current year, when it is rising again. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation for Stoke show that six out of the 20 wards come in the top ten per cent most deprived nationally, and all but one fall in the most disadvantaged 50 per cent. The number of primary aged pupils receiving free school meals, at 28.5 per cent, and of secondary pupils, at 24.8 per cent is 11 percentage points and eight percentage points above the national average respectively.

18. The pupil population in schools is on the decline. In primary schools, numbers have been declining annually since 1997 at an average of 2.5 per cent and are expected to continue to fall at a rate of 1.5 per cent each year until 2009. The secondary population has reached its peak and a decline is expected over the next decade. The council has responded with plans for reorganisation of primary education closely linked to a unique Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme that will re-build or refurbish all schools by 2005.

19. The city experiences a significant loss of pupils at primary and secondary stages to schools in the neighbouring authority. Approximately 1000 primary age pupils living in Stoke are presently estimated to be on the roll of Staffordshire schools. In September 2002, a net total of 130 Year 6 pupils transferred from Stoke primary schools to out of borough high schools, although some city schools also attracted pupils from outside the city.

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20. The minority ethnic population of 11.7 per cent in primary schools and 8.9 per cent in secondary schools has shown an increase, but is slightly below national averages and those for similar authorities<sup>1</sup>. The largest proportion of minority ethnic pupils are of Pakistani heritage.

21. The number of mainstream pupils across Stoke with a statement of special needs is 3.1 per cent compared with 3 per cent nationally. In primary schools 1.5 per cent, and in secondary schools 3.3 per cent of pupils have statements compared to national figures of 1.6 per cent and 2.4 per cent respectively. 1.8 per cent of all pupils who live in Stoke-on-Trent attend special schools compared with 1.4 per cent nationally.

## **Performance**

22. Standards of attainment in schools are unsatisfactory. Since the last inspection the overall rate of improvement in performance in Key Stages 1-3 has been broadly in line with, or faster than, that nationally and in similar authorities. However, with the exception of science and mathematics at Key Stage 2, performance remains below the national average in all three key stages.

23. Since the last inspection, the general patterns of performance and improvement have been inconsistent. Performance in 2002 shows that at Key Stages 1 and 3 the shortfall below national averages and similar authorities has widened while at Key Stage 2 it is closing.

24. For the year 2002, performance at the end of Key Stage 1, in mathematics, reading and writing at level 2 or above was below the national average and similar authorities. Performance in science at level 2 or above was in line with similar authorities, but below national averages. By the end of Key Stage 2, performance in science and mathematics at level 4 or above was in line with national averages and similar authorities. Performance in English at level 4 or above was below national averages and in line with similar authorities. At the end of Key Stage 3, the performance at level 5 or above in English and science was below the national average and well below in mathematics. Performance at level 5 or above, when compared with similar authorities, was in line in English but below in mathematics and science.

25. Since the last inspection, results at Key Stage 4 have been mixed, but below average overall. However, in 2002 results improved at a faster rate than that nationally and in similar authorities and the performance of pupils achieving one or more A\*-G grade and five or more A\*-G was in line with national averages and similar authorities. However, the percentage achieving five or more A-C grades remains below that of similar authorities and well below national averages. The average points score is in line with that of similar authorities and below national averages.

26. Attendance rates for primary and secondary schools have improved steadily and average attendance is broadly in line with that found nationally and in similar authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoke's similar authorities are Tameside, Sunderland, Oldham, Rotherham, Wigan, Walsall, Bolton, Rochdale, Barnsley and Gateshead.

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The rates of permanent exclusion in primary schools are broadly in line with those nationally and in similar authorities. However, the rates of permanent exclusion are above average in secondary schools.

### **Council structure**

27. At the time of the last inspection, Labour had a clear majority with 48 seats out of 60 council members. Since then there has been a major shift in the political balance of the council. The council has elected members representing 20 wards; 27 councillors are Labour and 18 Independent, with the remainder split between three other parties.

28. The council structure is relatively new and still developing. November 2002 saw the formation of a new council structure which is unique. In a referendum, the city voted for a structure in which an elected mayor and council manager constitute the council's entire executive. The mayor gives direction to the council and is a principal spokesperson on the council's behalf. The council manager, whose post includes the role of chief executive, works closely with the elected mayor in making day-to-day decisions, in line with the council's overall policies and budget.

29. Decisions of the executive are monitored and challenged by seven scrutiny commissions, one of which has oversight of the education and lifelong learning department. The scrutiny commissions hold the executive to account, monitor decisions and oversee Best Value. There are six overview commissions, including one for education, and all have the role of developing and reviewing council policy within the policy framework. Each commission has a political balance and is comprised of six elected members.

30. In order to give Stoke citizens a greater say in council affairs, 10 Community Forums have been established, each of which represents two wards. They include elected members and representatives from the local community and they advise on issues relevant to the Stoke community.

### **Funding**

31. The funding available to schools at the time of the last inspection was well below the average for unitary authorities. Since then, funding levels have improved. Stoke-on-Trent LEA's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) in 2002-03 was close to the average for unitary authorities and slightly higher than that for similar authorities. The table below shows the impact of the improved funding on the local schools budget (LSB) for 2002-2003.

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	<b>Stoke-on-Trent £ per pupil</b>	<b>Statistical neighbours £ per pupil</b>	<b>Unitary authorities £ per pupil</b>	<b>England £ per pupil</b>
<b>Primary local schools budget (LSB)</b>	£2884	£2799	£2830	£2929
<b>Secondary (LSB)</b>	£3395	£3596	£3606	£3768

*Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002-03.*

32. While the LSB per primary school pupil is some three per cent higher, the LSB per secondary school pupil is about 5.6 per cent below the average for the LEA's similar authorities. This reflects the fact that only a small minority of secondary schools in Stoke-on-Trent have sixth forms.

33. The LEA delegated some 87 per cent<sup>2</sup> of the LSB to schools in 2002-03. This is in line with the average for unitary authorities and the similar authorities group. The rate of delegation meets government targets. Excluding devolved standards fund grant, the individual schools budget (ISB) per pupil in both primary and secondary schools remained slightly below that of similar authorities, as shown in the table below.

	<b>Stoke-on-Trent £ per pupil</b>	<b>Statistical neighbours £ per pupil</b>	<b>Unitary authorities £ per pupil</b>	<b>England £ per pupil</b>
<b>Primary local schools budget (ISB)</b>	£2077	£2092	£2153	£2223
<b>Secondary (ISB)</b>	£2726	£2742	£2852	£2940

*Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002-03.*

34. The LEA and schools have benefited from the new local authority funding arrangements for 2003-04. Average funding has increased by some £217 (eight per cent) per pupil compared with 2002-03. As a result, individual schools' budgets have increased by about seven per cent per pupil. The LEA has passed on to schools the full increase in the schools formula spending share.

35. The table below compares the LEA's centrally-retained revenue budget for 2002-03, expressed in costs per pupil with those of similar authorities and LEAs in England as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> DfES figures

	<b>Stoke-on-Trent £ per pupil</b>	<b>Statistical neighbours £ per pupil</b>	<b>Unitary authorities £ per pupil</b>	<b>England £ per pupil</b>
<b>Strategic management</b>	£121	£122	£93	£101
<b>School improvement</b>	£20	£28	£26	£31
<b>Access</b>	£98	£89	£124	£131
<b>SEN</b>	£119	£137	£151	£160
<b>Total</b>	£357	£376	£394	£423

*Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002*

36. Taken together, centrally-retained budgets are lower than for similar authorities. However, the particularly low school improvement budget funds only about a quarter of the LEA's achievement division, most of the remainder being funded, in consultation with schools, by non-devolved grants. The centrally-retained SEN budget has increased by about 60 per cent since 2000-01, but remains well below that in similar authorities. This reflects the fact that most of the funding for SEN statements is devolved to schools. The strategic management budget is higher than the average for unitary authorities because of the high level of early retirement costs inherited at the time of local government reorganisation in 1997.

37. The LEA estimates that grant funding increases its base budget by about 40 per cent annually. While levels of Department for Education and Skills (DfES) grants are a little higher than for similar authorities, the LEA attracts significant levels of other grant funding for both revenue and capital projects from a wide range of sources such as Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and New Opportunities Fund. The LEA forecasts that, in 2003-04, it will attract external funding totalling about £52 million, almost a quarter of which will be from sources other than the DfES.

38. A unique Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme that covers all the authority's schools underpins the LEA's capital programme. The scheme is worth some £153 million and will ensure that all schools are brought up to standard by 2005 and are maintained at that standard until 2025. Additional capital expenditure has nevertheless increased significantly over the last three years from some £4 million in 2000-01 to an estimated £11.6 million in 2003-04.

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**The LEA's strategy for school improvement**

39. There were weaknesses in the LEA's strategy for school improvement at the time of the last inspection. The strategy was not consolidated and planning was not always as cogent or direct as it needed to be. Improvements to the Education Development Plan (EDP) were recommended. The LEA has made improvements and the school improvement strategy, including the Education Development Plan 2002–2007 (EDP 2), is highly satisfactory.

40. The education and lifelong learning department's priorities are outlined in the lifelong learning strategy which in turn links with the priorities in the corporate and community strategies. The EDP 2 was produced following an audit of need and thorough consultation with all partners. The priorities and actions are clearly articulated, reflect both national and local needs, and have been agreed by schools. There are a range of strategic and service plans which complement the EDP 2 and which provide further detail on the delivery of priorities. However, while some of these plans are good, the quality varies. The plans for behaviour are not clearly defined and lack focus.

41. LEA targets for 2003 and 2004 are challenging and fall within one or two percentage points of the aggregated targets from schools. The LEA has four additional targets under a Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) which further support those in the EDP 2. However, the LEA did not meet any of its 2002 core subject performance targets in Key Stages 2 and 3. It fell short by figures between two and six percentage points so that between six and ten percentage points need to be recovered in all subjects for 2003.

42. The implementation of the school improvement strategy is highly satisfactory. The LEA has conducted a thorough monitoring process against the year one delivery of the EDP 2. The findings are reported well and the evidence is incorporated into the updated plans for year two, including any shortfall in meeting targets and outcomes. Progress ranging from good to satisfactory has been made in all priority areas of EDP 2. The LEA reviews progress in each priority area every two months.

43. Excellence in Cities (EiC) and Education Action Zone (EAZ) initiatives have been introduced since the last inspection. The strategic and operational plans underlying these initiatives are integrated fully into, and support, the school improvement agenda. Their targets are complementary and extend those in EDP 2 and for the LPSA. Schools are positive about these initiatives.

44. Schools are aware of and confident about the strategy for school improvement. They see this as a contributing factor to the stronger partnership working that is developing between the LEA and schools.

**The allocation of resources to priorities**

45. The extent to which the LEA targeted its resources to priorities was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remains so.

46. The council has developed a useful tool to help evaluate objectively the funding which is allocated to each of its services. Despite some financial pressures, the council has assessed that almost all aspects of the education services are of high priority so that, in recent

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years, the service as a whole has been funded at or slightly above the level of SSA. This is consistent with the council's published priorities. The education and lifelong learning department and schools are helped in their financial planning by the fact that, in setting budgets, the council also provides indicative budgets for the two subsequent years.

47. The comparatively high levels of funding for the achievement division reflect appropriately the work needed to raise standards, and rates of improvement in recent years suggest that the investment is paying dividends. The centrally-retained SEN budget has increased significantly in recent years, but this year's £500,000 increase in schools' SEN budgets, with similar increases indicated for each of the next two years, now begins to address in earnest the SEN and inclusion priorities. Budget setting is timely and accurate. Managers and elected members monitor budgets regularly and effectively and budgetary control in recent years has been good.

48. The level of consultation with schools relating to the planning and review of school budgets is appropriate and the LEA is responsive to their advice. The newly established Schools Forum is beginning to be a formal channel of consultation and, in the meantime, a pre-existing working group of headteachers continues to provide more detailed advice to the LEA about its funding mechanisms. The LEA has agreed with its schools to act decisively to address the growing levels of budget surpluses in schools and, from 2004, excessive surpluses will be redistributed among schools.

49. Schools are generally positive about the educational rationale underlying the school funding formula. The formula distributes resources fairly and transparently in most respects, though it is outdated in its high level of itemisation. The proportion of schools' budgets that is pupil-led is only slightly lower than the average for unitary authorities, but too much is distributed to each school by means of lump sums. There is improved clarity in this year's formula in the identification of the funding allocated to schools to cater for pupils with SEN who do not have statements.

50. Recharges to the education and lifelong learning department for the services of other council departments are broadly comparable with similar authorities. However, there is some variability in the quality of the service level agreements governing the charges.

51. There are effective arrangements at corporate level to ensure that the high volume of bids for external funding match the council's strategic priorities and that grants are used in a co-coordinated manner. Where permissible, grants are used to cover the costs of their administration. Schools rate the LEA's support to them in bidding for grants as better than satisfactory.

52. The LEA has made effective use of grant funding in support of school improvement and in contributing to the council's wider regeneration agenda. In particular, there has been good progress in providing and improving sports facilities in a bid to raise the aspirations and self-esteem of young people. Capital funding is managed very well, with schools' own resources and those of the LEA being co-coordinated effectively to complement and add value to the benefits already in place as a result of the authority's Private Finance Initiative scheme.

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**Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value**

53. This aspect was not inspected in the last inspection. The council's performance is highly satisfactory.

54. The council's external auditor has given an unqualified opinion on the authority's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) for 2002-03, confirming that the plan meets statutory requirements. The plan reports modest performance in 2001-02, highlighting the educational challenges facing the authority. However, the selection of a small group of key performance indicators and targets relating to each of the council's six corporate aims provides a particularly effective means of focusing attention on priorities. The indicators chosen for the relevant sections of the draft 2003-04 BVPP appropriately reflect the increasing prominence being given to SEN and inclusion.

55. Most functions within the education and lifelong learning department have undergone Best Value reviews. Though often narrow in scope, the reviews have been conducted rigorously and to a common standard, in line with the comprehensive corporate guidance manual. The effectiveness of consultation has been a particular strength of many reviews. Inspections, after early reviews of the SEN support and educational psychology services, judged that both services were good and had promising prospects for improvement.

56. The quality of action plans arising from Best Value reviews is generally good. Plans conform to a consistent format and, in most cases, specify clear success criteria for each action as well as target dates and resource implications. Progress in the implementation of action plans is good and is monitored effectively by managers and elected members. The review process has contributed to the creation of a promising culture of continuous improvement within the directorate. This is characterised by the informative and evaluative annual reports produced by service heads to summarise progress within their sections and outlining areas for further improvement. This reflective approach has resulted in a broad range of service improvements that have contributed to the high level of satisfaction among schools about the services provided by the LEA. The directorate has achieved Investor in People status.

57. Performance management arrangements are developing satisfactorily across the directorate. Both operational plans and strategic plans such as the asset management plan and school organisation plan refer clearly to priorities and objectives within the EDP 2. Individual officers' performance targets also contain references to plans at a higher level. In some cases, however, the cross-referencing between plans is superficial, so that the precise contribution of proposed actions in one plan to the achievement of objectives in other plans is unclear.

## **Section 2: Support for school improvement**

### **Summary**

58. Since the last inspection some important aspects of the LEA's support have improved over the last four years. The LEA's role and the working agenda have been clarified for schools.

59. The effectiveness of school improvement services is judged highly satisfactory. Costs are comparatively high compared with other LEAs despite below average core LEA funding. The LEA has been right to invest in this area of work through attracting considerable external funding grants. A number of the recent changes, including increased delegation of funds to schools, emanate from a carefully executed Best Value review of advisory services. Overall, services provide highly satisfactory value for money.

### **The effectiveness of services to support school improvement**

60. The leadership of services to support school improvement continues to be good. There is strong and effective leadership from the director of education and the head of the advisory service. Good appointments have been made to key leadership posts and there is a depth of expertise which has been complemented by the effective use of consultants, secondments and lead teachers from schools. Priorities are clear and service plans reflect these well. Communication between the schools, officers and services is good and there is a strong understanding across the whole LEA of the school improvement priorities. Continuous improvement in the services is evident through rigorous evaluation of plans and projects.

61. At the time of the last inspection, the service was described as "small and only recently fully established". It is now a large service for the number of schools. The service is sufficient in size for its tasks and additional capacity is available through carefully targeted external funding and through strategic alliances with other LEAs and the private sector. There is a sound programme of professional development for school development advisers. Staff workloads are monitored and strategies in place to ease any points of pressure. There is a strong commitment from senior managers to challenge under-performance wherever it occurs and the service is currently examining ways of assessing the impact of advisers' work on raising standards in the schools in a more systematic way.

62. The effectiveness of strategic planning to support school improvement and the deployment of staff has improved and is highly satisfactory. Priorities are clear and, in most cases, the targets that have been set are appropriately ambitious and focus clearly on raising standards.

63. The performance management of services to support school improvement remains highly satisfactory. The effective strategic planning provides a good structure for individual staff to locate their work within the priorities that have been set. The service has introduced self-evaluation elements to ensure that Stoke's approach is compatible with the national standards for school improvement and, although recent, it looks secure. Performance review

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has been carried out systematically, though the evidence of its impact on individual performance tends to be anecdotal.

At the last inspection, the expertise of staff was satisfactory it is now good. Staff are carefully inducted into the education service and provided with a good range of developmental opportunities. This has been an important part of creating sustainable, skilled and committed teams and is having a positive impact on the growth in competence and confidence of advisers and other staff supporting school improvement. The school development advisers constitute a credible team with appropriate skills and experience to fulfil their role. They receive excellent support from the highly valued research team within the division.

### **Monitoring, challenge and intervention**

64. The LEA's procedures were satisfactory in the last inspection and are now good. The LEA has consulted widely and published a service level agreement for advisory services and a policy and procedures for *School Review, Support and Improvement*. These are good documents and headteachers understand the strategy for monitoring and challenge, including the criteria by which schools are identified for intervention. Schools are clear about which services are funded centrally and which can be purchased separately.

65. The LEA is rightly focused on the removal of all schools from formally designated categories of special measures and serious weakness. Since the last inspection the LEA has developed further its strategies for supporting schools causing concern and has developed good systems for ensuring that, in applying the criteria for intervention, a full range of LEA data is used. The LEA ensures that schools requiring different levels of support and intervention are clearly identified in its *Register of Specially Designated Schools* and this is understood by staff across LEA services. The performance of all schools is given detailed consideration through the work of the school improvement review groups. The LEA challenges its schools through the use of accurate and targeted data in conjunction with the school self-review and evaluation process and through the monitoring of national improvement strategies.

### **The focusing of LEA support on areas of greatest need**

66. The LEA has made good progress in focusing its support on areas of greatest need, and has improved provision from satisfactory to good. The school development advisers are deployed strictly to a formula which allocates additional time to schools in line with the transparent register of specially designated schools. This identifies schools on the basis of appropriate criteria. The management team allocates additional time to these schools. Schools understand how the criteria are applied and, while some headteachers still feel that weaker schools get a disproportionate amount of the available resources, the system of allocation is understood and applied rigorously.

### **The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools**

67. Schools recognise that the LEA has provided greater levels of challenge within the school self-review process through the provision of accurate and well-organised data. The

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system for challenging schools to improve is good. There are good links between school development advisers (SDAs) and other LEA staff who share and update their working knowledge of schools. The SDAs also provide advice on consultants and external sources of support that can be purchased by schools. Schools can also use the new brokerage arrangements operated through the advisory services. These arrangements operate well for Stoke schools.

68. Notes of visit are of sound quality. They are sufficiently sharp in focus and are a valuable record of the actions required by both the school and the LEA. As yet, the system for ensuring that these notes are copied to a school chair of governors is not carried out consistently. There is an expectation that schools will ensure this happens. However, in practice this varies considerably.

69. There have been significant improvements in the quality and use of performance data distributed both to schools and to LEA advisers and officers. The recommendation in the last inspection has been implemented assiduously. The quality of data is now very good and careful analyses are beginning to help target support even more effectively. The data provided to support the target setting process are impressive and well used, and all advisers are trained in their use. The LEA currently transfers data electronically and online transfer will be available shortly.

### **The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools**

70. In the last inspection this area of work was highly satisfactory and continues to be so. At that time the number of schools identified by Ofsted as requiring special measures (eight) and having serious weaknesses (nine) was very high. Since then the LEA has made highly satisfactory progress in supporting schools towards removal from these categories. There are currently only two schools in special measures and three with serious weaknesses (4.5 per cent of all Stoke schools). No schools have been placed in either category during this year. However, while schools are generally removed in a timely way, some of those in special measures have required support for more than two years.

71. The LEA has also identified a further twelve schools in need of one or more levels of intervention and a further fourteen schools which require close monitoring. These figures are high and indicate that while significant progress has been made in removing schools from special measures and serious weakness there remains a long tail of under-performance in the LEA's schools. Support for these schools is not yet as rigorous as for those in special measures or serious weakness. However, there has been good improvement in the LEA's capacity to identify under-performance in schools and intervene effectively with these schools.

72. Where schools have been removed from special measures or serious weakness the LEA has agreed an exit strategy with the school. This may include a heightened level of LEA support for a period until the school becomes fully self-managing again. There have been some marked improvements where schools, upon re-inspection, have been judged to be good and one school that was in special measures became a Beacon School.

73. Schools recognise the improvements made by the LEA in its ability to provide appropriately targeted support for schools causing concern, and there is now a satisfactory

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early identification of problems. The LEA's work of co-ordinating support to implement school and LEA action plans is good and in most cases the LEA has the appropriate expertise to help schools improve. Where there have been difficulties, in the past the LEA has identified the problems and has taken sensible action in improving its own capacity, particularly in relation to secondary schools. The LEAs monitoring of progress made by schools causing concern is satisfactory, but schools report that the role of the monitoring and evaluation officer has not been carried out consistently, particularly in relation to the provision of timely information for governors.

### *Recommendations*

#### **In order to improve the LEA's work with under-performing schools:**

- with the reduction in the number of schools designated as requiring special measures and having serious weaknesses, apply the same rigorous level of support to reduce the long tail of under-performing schools; and
- ensure that the lead officer for each school evaluates the progress being made, identifies what needs to be done to remove the school from the category of concern and ensures that governors are properly informed about the school's issues and progress.

74. Senior officers regularly report to elected members on the progress being made in under-performing schools, through the education scrutiny commission. Senior officers and elected members are prepared to use the full range of their legal powers when schools are not making sufficient progress. They have been willing to take unpopular decisions to tackle under-performance, for example using capability proceedings and school closures or amalgamation.

### **Support for literacy**

75. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for raising standards in literacy was highly satisfactory and remains so. The LEA's self-evaluation and other evidence confirm that the quality of support has been maintained. No fieldwork was carried out on this occasion.

### **Support for numeracy**

76. Support for numeracy was judged to be satisfactory in the last inspection, and is now good. The LEA's strategy is clear, and appropriate action plans are in place within the EDP 2 and in strategic deployment of support within identified and targeted schools causing concern. Schools understand the strategy and how to implement it. There are good relationships with the numeracy co-ordinators in schools, who are committed to the improvements required.

77. The performance of pupils at Level 4 and above by the end of Key Stage 2 has improved at a rate faster than the national improvement. Results rose by twice the national rate. However, based on current trends in performance, the LEA is unlikely to reach the challenging target of 82 per cent set for 2004.

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78. Support for numeracy is of high quality. Despite difficulties in recruiting another mathematics adviser, the LEA has been successful in appointing two consultants in the last two years. The LEA has been creative in its use of its consultants and leading mathematics teachers to ensure that the strategy has progressed without disruption. The strategy is managed very effectively and the strategy manager uses a range of evaluation tools to analyse the performance of the team and its impact in schools.

79. The careful and effective use of the LEA's data on school performance enables the numeracy team to monitor, challenge and support the quality of mathematics in schools well. Under-performance and low expectations are challenged and support is effectively targeted. In line with the priorities set out in the EDP 2, the performance of different groups of pupils, including higher attaining pupils and those from ethnic minorities, is carefully monitored and schools helped to implement appropriate strategies for improvement. Links with the literacy strategy, Key Stage 3 strategy and the work of the school development advisers are well managed by the strategy manager who also has responsibility for the local management of the numeracy strategy.

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

80. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for information and communication technology was highly satisfactory. The LEA's self-evaluation confirms that the quality of support has been maintained. No fieldwork was carried out, but it is judged that support for information and communication technology remains highly satisfactory.

### **Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3**

81. This is a new area for inspection. Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory, although there is limited evidence yet of a significant impact on results in Key Stage 3. The LEA has recruited a strong team of consultants covering each of the strands of the national strategy. Most secondary schools have made a satisfactory start to implementing the various strands. Under able leadership, the first round of training has been well received and consultants are beginning to make an impact in many of the schools, particularly where the LEA has identified the need for targeted support.

82. Continuity between the literacy and numeracy strategies for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is good. Transition between primary and secondary schools has been made a priority through an additional consultant appointment, using Neighbourhood Renewal funding. The LEA is beginning to help schools develop cross-curricular approaches to teaching and learning but it is too early to see any significant impact.

83. Standards at Key Stage 3 are fluctuating. They have improved but are consistently below the national average, and last year in mathematics they were well below average. The needs of able learners are not being well met. The targets set for 2004 are very challenging in all core subjects. However, the LEA is confident that there will be significant improvement by then and believes the targets will be met. The LEA provides very good quality end of key stage data on the performance of pupils, including value added data from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 results. The data are being used well to challenge performance in individual schools.

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**Recommendation****In order to improve the support provided in Key Stage 3:**

- ensure that the needs of able learners are given greater prominence in the Key Stage 3 strategy and ensure a close link with the LEA's strategy for gifted and talented pupils.

**Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers**

84. In the last inspection, support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, was unsatisfactory and weaknesses were identified in support at a strategic level. Progress has been good and these weaknesses have been overcome. Support is now highly satisfactory.

85. Between seven and eight per cent of pupils are from minority ethnic groups; of these, nearly six per cent have English as an additional language. There has been a recent small rise in the number of refugees and asylum seekers locating in Stoke. The largest minority ethnic group consists of pupils of Pakistani heritage. Under-achievement for this group represents one of the LEA's biggest challenges and strategies to bring about improvement are identified clearly in the EDP 2.

86. The management of the team has been significantly strengthened and grant funding has been devolved appropriately. Against a backdrop of the LEA's comprehensive and vigorous approach to issues of racial equality, good strategic decisions have been made in consultation with schools.

87. This area of work was subject to a Best Value review in 2001/02. As a consequence, the structure of the LEA team supporting minority ethnic achievement has changed significantly since the last inspection. The changes have enabled the LEA to work more effectively, and to delegate fully grant, funding and staffing responsibilities to eligible schools. The LEA has very recently established its new smaller core team using additional LEA funding and the vulnerable children grant. This has resulted in a rapid response team to support schools with small numbers of black minority ethnic pupils and for the children of refugees and asylum seekers.

88. Significant improvement has been made in the provision of pupil level data. This enables the LEA to monitor the attainment levels and exclusion rates of minority ethnic groups. Over the last year good progress has been made in narrowing the gap in the proportion of 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE. The gap in performance of minority ethnic pupils in GCSE reduced from 15.2 percentage points to 6.9 percentage points.

89. The support for Traveller pupils is provided through the West Midlands Consortium Education Service for Travelling Children. Strategic planning and direction remain strong with an experienced and knowledgeable team. The service has good links with schools and the Traveller communities. Support agreements with schools are clear and the service works closely with the education welfare service to improve attendance rates for Traveller pupils.

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**Support for gifted and talented pupils**

90. This has not been inspected previously. The support for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory. Proposals for action in the EDP 2 are sufficiently detailed and there is a clear published strategy. This stems from the Excellence in Cities gifted and talented strand for secondary schools and it is not sufficiently focused on the needs of primary schools. Criteria for success have been set in the EDP 2. These are precise in relation to secondary pupils but the intended outcomes for Key Stage 1 and 2 and for enrichment activities lack precision.

91. Where initiatives have been developed, they have been well co-ordinated and annual evaluations of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) work have been carried out. Processes for identifying gifted and talented pupils have been developed and are being applied consistently across the authority's secondary schools. The LEA has a clear mechanism for identifying gifted and talented pupils in its schools and a register is kept for pupils in the secondary sector.

92. The overall strategy is managed satisfactorily. The Excellence in Cities (EiC) co-ordinator is also the strategy manager for the LEA, though responsibility for work in the primary sector rests mainly with primary advisers and consultants. The strategy provides a sound basis for future development but is due for revision to ensure that it focuses sufficiently on the needs of all gifted and talented pupils in primary schools.

93. So far, there has been some very good sharing of information between some of the schools. The establishment of a network learning community in the south of the city is a step in the right direction in making the needs of more able learners central to the planning of all schools. This collaborative programme is helping to identify how the strategy will develop, particularly in the primary schools.

94. Plans for literacy and numeracy support for more able pupils are appropriate, but at an early stage of implementation. Support for gifted and talented pupils has started to figure more significantly in discussions with headteachers during the annual school self-reviews conducted with the school development advisers.

95. Since the Excellence in Cities strand commenced, little impact has been identified in the attainment of more able learners in the secondary schools. However, school co-ordinators and cluster co-ordinators report positive improvements in attitudes to learning and raised aspirations among students. Two annual summer schools for gifted and talented pupils have been held in recent years and these have provided a useful mechanism for helping some of the schools to take forward their own priorities for able pupils.

***Recommendations*****In order to improve the support for gifted and talented pupils:**

- revise the LEA strategy and guidance for gifted and talented pupils to ensure that it identifies clear targets and effective support for staff and pupils in primary schools; and
- ensure that all schools have a comprehensive approach to identifying and developing their able and talented pupils.

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### Support for governors

96. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for governors was satisfactory. The LEA's self-evaluation and other evidence confirm that the quality of support has been maintained. No fieldwork was carried out for this inspection, but support for governors remains satisfactory.

### Support for school management

97. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for school management was highly satisfactory. The LEA's self-evaluation and other evidence confirm that the quality of support has been maintained. No fieldwork was carried out on this occasion. Support for school management remains highly satisfactory.

### The effectiveness of services to support school management

98. The effectiveness of the LEA's services to support school management is good. The LEA has addressed effectively the recommendation from the last inspection that it should specify service standards and performance indicators for all services and monitor their cost and effectiveness.

99. Schools are highly satisfied with the quality of the large majority of traded services provided by the council. As a result, most schools continue to buy services from council providers. Schools are fully aware that alternatives are available, and the LEA provides client support to secure and monitor other service providers on request. Schools rate highly the LEA's support in developing their effectiveness as purchasers of traded services.

100. All traded services have undergone Best Value reviews, either singly or as part of a wider corporate review, and have established their competitiveness. In addition, most services were subjected to a rigorous external analysis when the Private Finance Initiative contract was signed in order to justify their continued provision by the council. In general, services have established a culture of improvement and schools appreciate the level of responsiveness to their concerns and suggestions.

101. Service level agreements are well presented to a helpful common format. Appropriately, they distinguish clearly between core services and those for which schools must pay. Traded services are available in a range of packages and discrete items of which the content and price is, in most cases, set out transparently. Almost all service level agreements set out key performance standards and report performance against these during the previous year.

102. **Financial services** have improved markedly from the satisfactory level reported at the time of the last inspection. The services are now of very good quality.

103. Almost every school buys its financial support from the education and lifelong learning's financial services unit, and both primary and secondary schools rate the service very highly. Headteachers and school administrators value the visits by finance officers to schools and, especially, the detailed pack of budget information they receive annually. The software included with the pack helpfully enables managers to model their budgets and, in

particular, their staffing levels. Financial training for school managers is reported to be of good quality. The council's financial systems work effectively, so that schools are able to process invoices and receive reconciliations electronically. Queries, also submitted electronically, are answered promptly.

104. There are effective links between finance officers and the advisory service that ensure decisions taken as part of the school supported self-review process are underpinned appropriately by sound financial advice. Within the education and lifelong learning department, finance officers contribute effectively to the accurate setting of centrally retained budgets and the tight levels of budgetary control.

105. Support for schools' **human resources** functions was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. There has been further improvement, and the service is now very good.

106. As with financial services, almost all schools choose to buy support from the education service's human resources team. Schools hold the quality of the service, including its links with payroll, in very high regard, especially in relation to the personnel advice provided and the support for individual casework. Casework is effectively supported by an up-to-date file of model personnel policies that reflect fully recent employment legislation and which are drawn up in consultation with trades unions. Training and regular briefings by the personnel team have been well received by headteachers and governors.

107. The service is responsive to schools' needs. It has addressed a shortage of supply teachers by establishing an in-house agency. In partnership with school managers and the authority's sickness insurance company, it has also achieved considerable success in reducing rates of sickness among teachers. In a climate of falling rolls and inevitable redundancies, the team has been effective in drawing up a scheme to minimise the impact of early retirement costs on the schools budget.

108. Within the education and lifelong learning department, the team provides managers with sound and informed advice about personnel issues and has been active in ensuring the consistent implementation of the regular review of individual performance by line managers.

109. **Property services** were satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. They have improved significantly since then, mainly because of the authority's Private Finance Initiative scheme and the effectiveness of the partnership working between the authority and its contractor. The quality of property services is now good.

110. Both routine and emergency maintenance of school buildings and of electrical and heating equipment are easily accessible and provide good value for money as part of the Private Finance Initiative contract. Schools are positive about the quality of the service. While routine maintenance forms part of the contractor's long-term commitment, the contractor also provides a highly responsive emergency service. Problems reported by schools to a 24-hour help desk are dealt with within three hours. This service includes a response to acts of vandalism, saving the authority an estimated £1 million each year. Despite four serious fires, the disruption to pupils' education has been minimal.

111. The existence of financial penalty clauses contributes to ensuring that building projects undertaken as part of the Private Finance Initiative scheme are generally carried out

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within the agreed timescale. Schools report some variability in the quality of site managers, but, overall, rate the programming and management of building projects as better than satisfactory.

112. The LEA seeks, with good justification, to influence the design and construction of building projects funded from schools' own resources in order to ensure that new buildings match the specifications necessary for their inclusion, for maintenance purposes, within the PFI portfolio. To this end, the LEA's premises and client services offers, in its service level agreement with schools, to procure and manage all aspects of school-funded building projects. The fee is modest, but the agreement does not contain clear enough performance standards to enable schools to judge the value for money of their investment.

113. **Services for information and communication technology (ICT) in school administration** were unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The report recommended that the LEA should improve the quantity and quality of technical support for ICT in school administration.

114. There has been good progress in addressing this issue. Schools now have common hardware and software platforms and administrators, in particular, value the availability and effectiveness of online technical support for schools' information management systems. They also speak highly of the associated training. The quality of services for ICT in school administration is now highly satisfactory.

115. It is too early to assess progress in the implementation of the LEA's new ICT strategy, much of which seeks to harness the curricular and administrative potential of the Stoke Community Online Resources for Education (SCORE). The system is highly promising in its capacity to provide internet and email access and individual folders to schools, pupils and their parents. It will eventually replace the existing intranet. Currently, however, the range of information available to schools via the intranet is patchy and not, in all cases, kept sufficiently up-to-date.

116. All secondary and special schools and a minority of primary schools now have broadband connectivity. This is beginning to alleviate the strain placed on the authority's email system and its consequent unreliability. In consultation with schools, the LEA is developing useful protocols to reduce the duplication of communication in both paper and electronic forms and to help those receiving emails to prioritise. There has been good progress in establishing effective electronic transfer of financial data between schools and the LEA and in the transfer of pupil census and attainment data. This is reflected in the LEA's improved use of performance data.

117. The quality of **cleaning** is good. Almost 90 per cent of schools choose to buy a contract from the council's city services department. Schools are generally satisfied with the service they receive and appreciate, in particular, the fact that cleaning staff are well trained and have access to high quality equipment and materials. The service is responsive to schools' needs, providing, at additional cost, increased cleaning capacity to deal with special occasions or emergencies.

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The service did not meet its own monitoring targets last year. However, the LEA's premises and client services provides light-touch monitoring and will arbitrate in cases of dispute between schools and the contractors.

118. This is a new area for inspection. The quality of **grounds maintenance** is highly satisfactory. Just over half of schools buy the council's service, which is provided under a well-defined service level agreement. Schools are generally satisfied with the quality of the service they receive and with the extra-curricular contributions it makes to improving pupils' environmental awareness.

119. The significant proportion of schools choosing alternative providers does so mainly on grounds of cost. While the LEA premises and client services provides a degree of light monitoring, this is not sufficiently systematic to ensure the long-term asset management of school grounds and outdoor sports facilities is adequate.

120. **Catering** was not inspected in the last inspection. The quality of the service is good. Ninety per cent of schools use the council's service; primary and special schools do so through a central contract with the education and lifelong learning department, while over half the secondary schools have used their delegated funding to enter into individual contracts with the city services department.

121. Schools are well satisfied with the quality of the service. Their views compare very favourably with those of schools in other LEAs. The service monitors its performance thoroughly and the take-up of free and paid school meals is well above the average for similar authorities. Secondary schools benefit from the re-investment of catering profits to improve dining facilities. Though primary schools report a degree of variability in the quality of meals, these are being addressed, to a large measure, through the refurbishment of school kitchens, with meals being prepared centrally.

### **The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers**

122. The LEA's work in this new area for inspection is good. The recruitment and retention of a suitably "qualified and self-improving educational workforce" are objectives for the LEA within priority five of the EDP 2. A rigorous approach to the recruitment and retention of teachers has been developed in the last four years. The management of the strategy, shared between the head of human resources and the adviser responsible for continuing professional development (CPD) is good.

123. In 2000 the teacher vacancy rate rose above the national average but this has stabilised in the last three years. Levels of teacher vacancies have been in line with the regional and national averages over this period. The LEA has been effective in analysing its staffing needs and it markets itself with clarity and confidence. It has been active in contacting initial teacher training institutions, has developed a vacancy website, secured preferential rates for local housing and runs its own graduate teacher scheme and a supply teacher agency. The LEA has also been very active in recruiting newly qualified teachers, they are well supported and have ensured a steady flow of new teachers into Stoke schools. These strategies have been successful in reducing the impact of shortages in teaching staff

across the city. However, there are important local difficulties experienced by some schools in challenging circumstances and in secondary subjects such as mathematics and science.

124. The work of the achievement division is good in relation to the comprehensive approach taken to CPD. This is a central feature of the LEA's strategy for teacher retention. Having a successful and cared for workforce is a high priority for Stoke and there are also significant improvements occurring in the condition of school buildings as sound working environments for children and teachers. There are good induction programmes for both newly qualified teachers and new headteachers. These are essential with over 120 new teachers annually and an average annual turnover of headteachers of almost ten per cent in recent years. The overall approach to professional development necessary to make an impact on teacher retention and teacher quality is robust and supported well by the schools.

### **Section 3: Special educational needs**

#### **Summary**

125. Special educational needs is now satisfactory. Improvements have been made in the management of the Code of Practice and in the efficiency with which statements are issued. Schools have access to a greater range of expertise from the support services. A range of initiatives help the LEA to monitor school performance and to target support and intervention more effectively. The new strategy for SEN is widely accepted and weaknesses have been identified clearly. However, detailed planning for its implementation is at an early stage. Mechanisms for distributing SEN funding for statements to schools are unsatisfactory and are not compatible with the priority the LEA gives to inclusion.

#### **Strategy**

126. At the time of the last inspection the LEA's strategy for special educational needs was unsatisfactory. Since then improvement has taken place and the LEA's strategy for special educational needs is now satisfactory.

127. The LEA is now managing effectively what was, in the previous inspection, a chaotic situation. The demand for statements is being brought under control and the percentage of pupils for whom statements are maintained is reducing steadily, although it is still high in secondary schools. The percentage of pupils placed in special schools remains high when compared with national averages. However, over the last three years, the percentage of pupils subject to newly issued statements who are placed in mainstream schools has increased and now roughly matches the national statistics.

128. Following the last inspection, the LEA appointed consultants to provide a review of special educational needs and their report established a substantial agenda for action, which is being implemented. The LEA has published an adequate policy on special educational needs which sets out the broad intentions. It has been slower to develop a clear strategic plan to show how the policy will be implemented, although a strategy has been circulated recently for consultation. This strategy provides a good analysis of the areas of provision and practice which the LEA needs to address in managing SEN effectively. It identifies the high percentage of statements, the increase in the demand for statementing on transfer to secondary school, the under-identification of pupils with SEN in primary schools and the need to develop a more flexible role for special schools. The objectives of the strategy are largely understood by the headteachers who contributed to discussion groups for this inspection.

129. A suitable priority for SEN is included in the EDP and this is accompanied by a recently updated action plan which reflects the SEN strategy. The plan details a very ambitious programme and the extensive list of intended actions are not sufficiently prioritised.

130. Following the last inspection, the functions of the special needs division were reallocated between the support services and achievement divisions. The latter now includes

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the special needs support service. New posts of a SEN officer and senior adviser for SEN have been appointed in the last two years. The leadership for the SEN strategy resides with the director of education, who chairs an officers' group that coordinates the actions taken. This has helped to ensure that SEN is a high priority throughout the work of the education and lifelong learning department. However it has placed additional responsibilities on the director of education and has not provided the opportunity to strengthen the strategic capacity of the senior management team.

### **Statutory obligations**

131. At the time of the last inspection the way in which the LEA discharged its statutory duties for SEN was unsatisfactory, it is now satisfactory. The previous report identified a substantial backlog of requests for statements which took too long to process. A great deal of work has taken place to help manage this effectively. It has improved and is now efficient. The LEA has published criteria which, while sometimes repetitive, have helped schools to develop appropriate thresholds for SEN. Effective moderation of requests for statutory assessment and for statements takes place in panels which include representatives from schools. The SEN assessment unit is well organised. However, the LEA does not routinely receive reports from schools detailing the findings of the annual reviews. The LEA staff, are already working to ensure a better response.

132. There are very few appeals made by parents. The parent partnership is operating effectively using a good network of befrienders and supporters who are well organised and have their work supported by the parent partnership officer. She is line managed by the SEN Officer. This has not created difficulties, but it does not help to ensure objectivity.

### ***Recommendation***

**In order to safeguard the objectivity of the work of the parent partnership officer:**

- enable a senior member of staff who is not directly involved in the assessment and placement of children with SEN to line manage the parent partnership officer.

### **SEN functions to support school improvement**

133. The LEA's support to schools for improving special educational needs is highly satisfactory. This has improved since the last inspection when it was unsatisfactory. Although individual services made sound contributions, there were important gaps in the LEA's knowledge of overall school provision. Since the last inspection, Ofsted school inspection evidence demonstrates a significant improvement in the percentage of schools which are making satisfactory or better provision for SEN. The LEA has greatly improved the quality of its guidance and published a comprehensive SEN handbook.

134. In another useful development, a helpful self-assessment tool has been devised for schools. This has been used in all schools within the annual school review process. The special educational needs support services has conducted a systematic and well-organised audit of the operation of the code of practice in schools. It is intending to conduct this annually: its results, when used with the findings of the schools' self-reviews, clearly

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identified the schools which require greater support. It has focused first on policies and processes and has not included monitoring the attainment of pupils with SEN or schools' expenditure on SEN, or forging links with an analysis of the outcomes of annual reviews.

135. Headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators are well supported by the senior adviser and support services and they have access to highly valued support and training. Support services are well organised and communication between them has improved as they are now sited in one building. Management systems are sound. These include service level contracts, regular monitoring of performance indicators and annual reports on progress. The learning support service has broadened its expertise significantly by careful and systematic opportunities for its staff to embark on accredited professional training courses. This provides an exemplary model of how a small local authority can develop and extend the specialisms of its staff when these may be in short supply nationally.

### **Value for money**

136. At the last inspection value for money was unsatisfactory. It has now improved and is satisfactory. School provision and the management of special needs have improved and support services are more effective in targeting their support. The budget for SEN, has been lower than the average for LEAs. The LEA, in line with the priority to improve SEN, has enhanced the school's budgets by £0.5m this year. Similar increases are planned for each of the next two years. The audit of SEN, combined with rigorous data on pupils' attainment, will enable the LEA to distribute funding for school action and school action plus using actual pupil numbers.

137. The LEA, when faced with crises of mounting expenditure and demands for statements, had to take firm action in the short term. They used a blunt funding mechanism which acted to deter schools from seeking statements over a particular number. However, effective use of criteria and moderation, combined with training and support to schools, has led to better management of the demand. This funding mechanism is now inappropriate and not in line with the LEA's stated priority for social inclusion, and its review is overdue. The audit of special needs which is conducted annually is useful but has not included any monitoring of the way in which schools deploy their budget for SEN.

### ***Recommendations***

**In order to improve the deployment of SEN funding to support the priority for social inclusion:**

- review the way in which funding is devolved to schools for statements of special educational needs; and
- introduce regular monitoring of schools' expenditure on special needs within the SEN audit.

## **Section 4: Promoting social inclusion**

### **Summary**

138. Improvements have taken place since the last inspection in every aspect of work promoting social inclusion, most notably improving and up-dating school buildings, improving attendance and raising the attainment of under-performing groups such as children who are looked after by the local authority. Social inclusion is rightly a high priority. Working arrangements between different agencies are being placed on a firm foundation of partnerships and corporate groups. Provision for the education of children who have no school place is more varied and better structured, although work is required to improve rates of reintegration. A range of strategies has been developed to improve support for behaviour. These are not used sufficiently, systematically or strategically. Provision for pupils with statements of emotional, behavioural and social difficulties (EBSD) remains in short supply.

### **The strategy to promote social inclusion**

139. The LEA's strategy to promote social inclusion is satisfactory. This strategy was not inspected at the time of the last inspection. Since the previous inspection, improvements have been made in rates of attendance and the achievement of looked after children. In 2002, the percentage of young people leaving school without any qualification decreased, so that it is now in line with national averages. A relatively high number of young people at Key Stage 4 attend alternative curriculum provision outside school. There has been progress in reducing permanent exclusions although these have increased slightly recently. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs who have been permanently excluded is too high. The number of teenage pregnancies is high. In addition, from time to time, there have been racial tensions in some areas of the community.

140. Social inclusion has a high priority in the council's plans including those for education. Appropriate priorities for improving the attainment of under-performing groups and behaviour are included in the EDP 2. The LEA and schools have been successful in stimulating developments through bidding for grant funding from a large number of national projects. These have released new resources into schools. However, the strategic overview of how these projects interrelate is at an early stage of development.

141. The working arrangements between the major agencies are satisfactory and are developing in line with the government's intentions. The Children and Young People's Partnership has been convened. A sensible operational plan is in place to stimulate further developments in partnership work. A Children's Board, which brings together representatives from statutory agencies of health, social services and education, has met twice under the chairmanship of the council manager and is establishing its working parameters. It has been agreed that education will take the lead in developing approaches for vulnerable children. Work to develop the Local Preventive Strategy has been commissioned and this will assist in providing a strategic overview. A few examples exist of pooling of resources between agencies for approaches to bullying, looked after children and parent education. There are plans to extend this practice with the appointment of a joint commissioning manager.

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142. The education and lifelong learning department has access to robust and current data so that children's attainment and whereabouts can be monitored. Data on the attainment and placement of children who are looked after by local authorities are exchanged effectively between social services and education departments. The ability to track children using unique pupil reference numbers is now developed. The development of procedures for identification, referral and tracking is under discussion and the mechanics, have yet, still to be resolved.

143. The current management and leadership arrangements have enabled progress to be made, but responsibility is fragmented. The director of education has taken significant additional responsibilities for chairing an officers' co-ordinating group and for behaviour, liaison with health and membership of the new Children's Board. The assistant director (Support Services) has provided overall management for attendance, education out of school, looked after children and leading on reorganisation of schools. There is a gap in the strategic capacity of the department to lead these developments. There are early plans to create a new senior post.

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

144. At the time of the last inspection, the LEA's effectiveness in relation to the provision of school places was judged highly satisfactory and it remains so.

145. In the face of high levels of inherited surplus capacity in its primary schools and rapidly declining pupil numbers, the LEA has acted vigorously to rationalise its provision of primary school places. The authority's data for January 2002 show surplus places amounting to about 16 per cent of capacity in primary schools, with over one fifth of schools having more than 25 per cent surplus capacity. By August 2005, a series of closures and amalgamations already approved by the schools organisation committee will have reduced the number of maintained primary schools from 88 at the time of the last inspection to 74. This will remove almost 4000 primary school places.

146. The LEA has taken as much action as has been feasible to date. Nevertheless, its highly accurate projections indicate that, unless the council's regeneration plans succeed in attracting new employment and in-migration, surplus capacity in primary schools in 2005 is likely to exceed the 2002 level. Planning takes too little account of the potential benefits of the community use of school buildings in reducing surplus places and addressing wider aspects of regeneration.

### ***Recommendation***

#### **In order to improve the quality of school place planning:**

- conduct a further review of primary provision, taking full account of the potential for the wider community use of school buildings.

147. nursery provision so as to improve co-ordination across the foundation stage, and significant improvement to the authority's SEN provision. Surplus places are currently not yet an issue in secondary schools, where only one school has more than a quarter of its places empty. Appropriately, however, the LEA has begun to plan ahead, because the declining primary school population will soon affect secondary schools.

148. There has been extensive consultation about the LEA's reorganisation plans, and the appropriately constituted school organisation committee has approved all but two of the proposals. The availability, through Private Finance Initiative and other capital sources, of new and better facilities for pupils and school staff has been a key factor in securing such a high degree of consensus.

149. The school organisation plan is comprehensive and meets statutory requirements, although it does not include a map of the local area. The plan sets out clearly the authority's provision for all phases of education, the principles governing reorganisation and the conclusions drawn from the analysis. Reorganisation has so far been used effectively to close five schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses. However, the plan is not explicit enough in terms of showing how specific proposals will contribute to corporate priorities such as school improvement and community cohesion.

#### *Recommendation*

#### **In order to improve the quality of school place planning:**

- specify clearly how the actions proposed in the school organisation plan will contribute to school improvement and other corporate priorities.

#### **Asset management**

150. This is a new area for inspection. The quality of the LEA's asset management planning is good.

151. At its inception in 1997, the authority inherited building stock that had suffered from under-investment over many years. The PFI scheme, covering all maintained schools within the city, will ensure that, by 2005, every school is rebuilt or refurbished to clearly specified output standards. The contractor will then maintain the schools to the same output standards until 2025, at which point they will be handed back to the authority with a guarantee that no major work will be required for a further five years.

152. This sound investment, worth some £153 million over the lifetime of the contract, effectively transfers the risk associated with maintaining the condition of school buildings to the contractor for the foreseeable future. It will transform the authority's school estate for the benefit of pupils and the school workforce. The contractors have already refurbished 44 schools and rebuilt five others. A further four new schools are planned under the terms of the scheme. All schools will be well lit and energy efficient. New buildings, though not generous in terms of the space they afford, conform with DfES guidelines that were in force when the PFI contract was signed. The buildings are well designed to meet the needs of the age-group of pupils for whom they will cater, including adequate ICT infrastructure. All new buildings are fully accessible to those with physical disabilities.

153. The transfer of the risks associated with the condition of school buildings allows the LEA to concentrate its asset management planning on issues relating to the sufficiency and suitability of its stock. The work is planned in consultation with schools and is clearly linked to the authority's strategic priorities such as its reorganisation programme and the need to increase the range and quality of SEN provision and to improve the quality of facilities for sport and the arts across the city. The asset management plan has been judged as satisfactory with good features by the DfES for each of the last two years.

154. LEA officers and the Private Finance Initiative contractor work very effectively in partnership to co-ordinate all sources of capital in order to maximise the benefit and minimise disruption to schools. In particular, there is close liaison to ensure that the design of new building work funded or part-funded from non-PFI capital sources meets PFI specifications, so that the contractor is able to accept responsibility for its subsequent maintenance.

### **Admissions**

155. The LEA's effectiveness in relation to admissions to schools was judged highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. Since then, there has been further improvements, and this aspect of the LEA's work is now good.

156. The LEA provides a good service to parents. Underpinning this lies the LEA's success in securing the agreement of all secondary schools, including aided schools, that they will limit the number of places offered annually to the planned admission number.

157. The LEA's primary and secondary admissions booklets are informative, attractive and meet statutory requirements. While almost all applicants for primary places and 96 per cent of those for secondary places achieve their first preferences, the booklets do not contain easily accessible figures to inform parents, on the basis of the previous year's admissions data, of the likelihood that their applications will be successful. The few appeals against admissions decisions are held in good time to enable pupils to take part in induction arrangements at their new schools.

158. LEA officers provide further active and valued support to parents to help them gain places for their children in their chosen schools. Officers attend open evenings for prospective parents and pupils at secondary schools and are accessible at the LEA offices. They also produce a range of helpful pamphlets to help parents deal with issues such as exclusion and transfers between schools.

159. The LEA already co-ordinates the admissions process for secondary schools and therefore complies, well ahead of schedule, with this aspect of the new code of practice on admissions. The admissions policy meets current statutory requirements and work is in progress to ensure that the admissions forum tackles the further changes necessary to comply with the new requirements.

### **Provision of education for pupils who have no school place**

160. The provision for pupils who have no school place is satisfactory. Improvements have taken place since the last inspection. At that time, provision was inadequate, the pupil

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referral unit required special measures and there were delays in making alternative provision, which was sometimes too limited.

161. The LEA's responsibilities for making full-time provision are met. Systems for the admission of children to alternative provision are tight. There are sound procedures for tracking children's whereabouts. Three pupils currently receive home tuition and a handful do not access the provision they are offered. These are unusual cases which are reviewed regularly. However, despite extension of in-school provision of learning support units and learning mentors, which are funded by Excellence in Cities, weaknesses remain in the relatively high numbers of pupils receiving alternative curriculum provision outside school. The rates of reintegration for Key Stage 3 pupils are too low.

162. Provision of education for pupils who have no school place has been extended and is now well structured, adequate and varied. Two pupil referral units are maintained for pupils at Key Stage 3. A curriculum policy for the pupil referral units is in place. One unit, 'Ed Start', has been established since September 2002 and the other, ACE, no longer requires special measures. This unit offers support for a small number of pupils prior to school exclusion with the intention of reintegrating them into school. Ed Start provides education for 40 children at Key Stage 3. Arrangements are still new but to date only 12 pupils have been reintegrated into school. Twenty-two Year 9 pupils will transfer from the unit to alternative curriculum provision at Key Stage 4.

#### *Recommendation*

**In order to improve the provision for pupils who have no school place:**

- take steps to increase the rate of reintegration of pupils on roll of the Ed Start into mainstream schools.

163. Provision at Key Stage 4 is made by a relatively high number of 120 full-time places provided under a contract with four providers which include two colleges of further education. There are plans to expand the number of places to 200. This provision has recently been inspected. It has many strengths. The progress and attendance of the young people are closely monitored. However, young people have too few opportunities to obtain external qualifications and their curriculum is not monitored appropriately. Following the inspection, the LEA has taken suitable steps to improve the specification for the providers so that weaknesses are addressed. A team of six personal advisers, provided by Connexions, offer the young people specialist support. Effective support is provided for young women who are mothers and this has led to significant improvements in attendance and attainment, with a good partnership between the staff from the LEA, Health Trust and Sure Start.

164. Provision of education for children and young people with medical needs has been improved and a pupil referral unit for these pupils has been registered recently. There are sensible plans for them, where possible, to enjoy increased social opportunities through group work. There are suitable arrangements for monitoring the curriculum provided for the very small number of children who are educated by their parents at home.

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## Attendance

165. Support for raising standards of attendance is good. Significant improvements have taken place since the previous inspection, when support for attendance was unsatisfactory. Education welfare officers were well regarded but their value was undermined by poor systems.

166. Since the last inspection, rates of attendance have shown consistent and steady improvement and, in all phases, they are in line with national averages. The strength of the approach has been the good balance between working with individual children and their families and systematically applying a good and varied range of strategies which have helped schools to improve their systems and processes. An effective, thorough whole school attendance review has been devised. More recently, an appropriate and well-focused project has been piloted to support primary aged children who have emerging attendance problems through transition to secondary school. Reasonable referral systems are in place. Good use has been made of legal powers including truancy patrols and parental prosecution.

167. The education welfare service is well managed. Its work is guided by well-documented, clear policies and procedures which are organised in a highly accessible and systematic way. Detailed and thorough analyses of attendance rates inform the support. In secondary schools the service is school-based and funding is devolved to schools for managing the staff, while the LEA retains responsibilities for policy, strategy and monitoring. The respective responsibilities of schools and the service are clear, deployment of staff is transparent and the work of the service is guided by a clear service level agreement. Weaknesses, however, still remain in record keeping and in identifying clearly which service has the overall accountability for cases which require the involvement of many different agencies. Nevertheless, the education welfare service has made significant strides since the last inspection. This improvement has required hard, rigorous and determined work.

## Behaviour support

168. The support for improving behaviour and discipline in schools is satisfactory and has improved since the last inspection, when it was poor. The LEA had been slow to work on the issue, and its action in relation to secondary schools was inadequate. Since then, permanent exclusions have reduced, although the statistics need to be reviewed alongside the high number of children in alternative curriculum provision at Key Stage 4. The percentage of children with statements of special educational needs who are excluded and of fixed-term exclusions from primary schools is high.

169. Behaviour has a high priority in the LEA's strategic plans and in the EDP 2. The recently revised action plan for the EDP 2 priority does not focus sufficiently on meeting the targets in the Behaviour Support Plan, for improving rates of reintegration or reductions in the number of exclusions of statemented pupils.

170. The director of education chairs the officers' group which co-ordinates the developments. The educational psychology service takes responsibility for leading the work. It has had some success in developing schools' understanding of behaviour as a special need, including the use of schools action plus and individual education plans. The shortage of

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provision for children with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties is being addressed through establishing learning support units in special schools for moderate learning difficulties and a new unit providing 20 places in one special school. Nevertheless, in the absence of suitable alternatives, a number of pupils with behaviour difficulties but not learning difficulties are placed in schools outside of the city. Good links have been forged with the child and adolescent mental health service.

#### *Recommendation*

**In order to improve the educational opportunities for pupils with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties to attend school in their local area:**

- actively explore the options which are available locally and regionally to extend the day provision which is available for these pupils.

171. A wide range of promising initiatives has been developed to support schools. Learning support units and learning mentors have been established in most secondary schools through Excellence in Cities. The LEA has now usefully conducted an evaluation of these. A behaviour improvement programme has been initiated and is in an early stage of development in four secondary and 16 primary schools. This is a substantial budget which is focused on reducing the rates of exclusion. Whole school approaches have been developed such as the interrogation of data on critical incidents, a whole school behaviour review and the inclusion of behaviour in school self review. A variety of training opportunities are provided. Additional support is provided by a primary support team and the pupil referral units at Key Stage 3. Recent developments have focused appropriately on the importance of early intervention. A thorough training programme for parents has just started its work. Four nurture groups have been set up to provide additional support to young children at risk in primary schools.

172. However, while all the initiatives are potentially valuable and a great deal of effort is being exerted, schools still express concerns about behaviour and discipline. The impact of some initiatives and take-up of others are not as great as could be expected. There is a strategic weakness in the way in which the initiatives are deployed to drive improvements. The range of initiatives which are available and the circumstances in which they can be used are not always clear. They do not always work together in a sufficiently coherent and systematic way so that their benefits can be maximised.

#### *Recommendations*

**In order to improve the LEA's support for behaviour and discipline in schools:**

- set out clearly the initiatives which are available including a description of the activities and the circumstances whereby they could most helpfully be used and providing some case studies of effective practice;
- develop packages of support using a combination of the different initiatives which can be systematically used in schools;
- disseminate the above information to schools;

- identify with schools any gaps in the support and commission work which will help to fill these.

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

173. This aspect was not inspected at the time of the last inspection. The way in which the LEA discharges its responsibilities for child protection is highly satisfactory, and the education and lifelong learning department fulfils its corporate responsibilities for safeguarding children. A recent social services inspectorate review of the council's child protection arrangements found that the area child protection committee (ACPC) had been slow to adopt corporate responsibility for child protection. The principal education welfare officer acts as the education and lifelong learning department's representative on the ACPC and regularly attends the committee and sub committee meetings. He provides the department's senior management team with valuable feedback from the meetings about relevant child protection matters. The budget for the area child protection committee is currently under discussion. The LEA makes no formal financial contribution but in lieu of this provides the venue for training events. The education and lifelong learning department has helpfully reviewed its arrangements for child protection in the light of the recommendations of the committee of enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié. No recent part 8 enquiries of serious child protection cases have involved education.

174. Suitable procedures and guidance for protecting children have been circulated to schools. The LEA monitors the identification by schools of designated teachers. Training events with appropriate content are organised annually and the attendance is generally very good. The principal educational welfare officer reviews who has attended the course, although there is no formal procedure whereby the LEA advises schools on how often teachers should attend training and monitors the date of training to ensure that they are all suitably up-to-date. The attendance of staff from education on multidisciplinary training events is good. Training is also provided for designated governors. Schools have been briefed on the implications of the new statutory responsibilities for safeguarding children, which will come into force next year.

#### ***Recommendation***

##### **In order to ensure that children are safeguarded from significant harm:**

- add the date of the most recent training to the database of the names of designated teachers and adopt more formal means of alerting headteachers when the training of designated teachers requires up-dating.

175. Schools have some concerns about the speed of response of social services to their referrals. A senior member of the social services department has attended headteacher meetings to respond to the concerns.

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*Recommendations***In order to improve the liaison between social workers and teachers:**

- take steps to identify more precisely the reasons for schools' concerns and familiarise schools with the threshold employed by social services to determine appropriate referrals;
- circulate to schools lists of services which may provide preventive support for parents and children who fall outside the remit of social services and yet require some support.

179. Health, safety and welfare functions were not inspected previously. The LEA has clear policies and procedures for Health and Safety, school security and educational visits and provision is highly satisfactory. Risk assessments are carried out regularly and areas of high risk are dealt with effectively. Schools are well supported by relevant staff. Appropriate training is provided but because not all schools engage with this the LEA cannot be sure that Health and Safety issues are understood and managed properly in all its schools. The LEA provides very good guidance and is currently developing on-line approaches to making this available to all schools and governors. The Health and Safety function is carried out within a well-planned and monitored budget which provides good value for money.

**Looked after children**

180. The LEA's support for raising the attainment of children who are looked after by the local authority is highly satisfactory. This was not inspected in the previous inspection. Targets have been set for improvement in attainment in the EDP and also through the Local Public Service Agreement. Generally improvements in attainment at Key Stage 2 and at GCSE are good. Targets for the percentage of pupils who attain one or more GCSE passes at grade A\*-G and five or more GCSE passes at grade A\*-C have been met and exceeded. However, although progress is satisfactory, the percentages are still significantly lower than the Stoke averages and national averages for all pupils. The percentage of young people who leave care with no qualifications remains high, although an analysis has been conducted which has helped to cast some light on the reasons for this. Attendance of the children is, in the main satisfactory.

181. Monitoring the whereabouts, attainment, attendance and progress of the children is very good. There is an efficient and robust database which is scrutinised regularly and provides timely information for schools. Suitable joint plans by the relevant agencies and government departments have been drawn up to guide and coordinate the work. Members have adopted a policy on corporate parenting which is comprehensive and thorough and specifies their role clearly.

182. Individual children are supported by three support teachers. Sixty per cent of children have personal education plans, a proportion that is barely acceptable. Nevertheless, the support teachers monitor the quality of personal education plans and ensure that targets are feasible and the actions specified are being taken. Training courses have been provided for teachers and newly appointed social workers. The LEA has organised events which

celebrate the young people's achievements. Work has taken place to promote consultation and discussion with the children and young people to inform developments. The social services department has ensured that ICT and internet facilities are available in foster homes.

#### *Recommendation*

**In order to improve the attainment of children who are looked after by local authorities:**

- ensure that personal education programmes are drafted for all children who are looked after by the local authority.

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

183. The LEA's work on combating racism is highly satisfactory. Senior staff understand the local context and the need to be watchful, so that the early signs of tensions between the communities can be detected. When there were racial tensions in several northern towns, the concerted and coordinated action of Stoke council, including education and schools, in cooperation with the police, managed to calm communities and ease the tensions. Schools, the education and lifelong learning department and the police worked closely together providing each other with regular up-dates of information and local intelligence which helped to provide, if required, a rapid response. Following this, agencies collaborated to provide a range of activities which helped to bring communities together to enjoy a range of sport and social events. This work was very well planned, coordinated and effective.

184. The LEA has assumed a strengthened monitoring role in relation to racist incidents and to analysing factors affecting the achievement of pupils from specified minority ethnic groups. It has also been very active in promoting the Commission for Racial Equality's standards "Learning for All" and these have been integrated into the LEA school self review and evaluation process.

## **Section 5: Corporate issues**

### **Summary**

185. Corporate planning and implementation were unsatisfactory in the last inspection. The effectiveness and speed of decision making were satisfactory and the quality of leadership by members and senior education officers was good. Since then, the council has improved the coherence and consistency of its corporate plans. Performance in all areas is now at least highly satisfactory. Partnership working and the quality of advice given to elected members are good.

186. Elected members and officers have continued to develop a clear, shared and ambitious vision for the social and economic regeneration of the city, with education at the heart of its corporate priorities and future development. The council has developed a number of strategies to attract funding and uses national initiatives to address long-standing problems in educational provision and the regeneration of areas of the city. A clear framework has been developed which ensures that decision-making and actions across the broad front of social and educational initiatives in the city are timely and involve all relevant parties.

187. The council faces a massive challenge in addressing the pattern of industrial decline and low aspiration among communities in the city and in ensuring the rebuilding and regeneration of local environments. No one element can be addressed in isolation, and progress in all areas will require a long term approach with developments working in parallel.

188. There is a culture of accountability and drive across the council, focused clearly on improving services in order to achieve its ambitions. The council, officers and local partners know that the time is right for rising to the challenge and harnessing the support available locally and nationally.

### **Corporate planning**

189. At the time of the last inspection, corporate planning and its implementation were unsatisfactory. They are now highly satisfactory and linked closely to financial planning. Education has a high priority and contributes to achieving the council's aims. It is embedded into all the key strategic plans. All plans are coherent. They have a high priority for regeneration and the need to raise aspirations and opportunities for lifelong learning. The plans are far-reaching and visionary in content.

190. The community strategy has only recently been finalised as a discrete plan. Previously, community priorities had been included in other strategic plans. The plan represents and reflects the hard work and strong partnership which exists within the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which is working well with the council.

191. The corporate plan has recently been revised and, along with the community strategy, was approved by the council during the inspection period. The corporate plan is well structured with six priorities, one of which is dedicated to education and learning. Each

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priority has clear actions linked to departments across the council. These actions in turn are cross-referenced to strategic departmental plans, for example EDP 2.

192. The Best Value Performance Plan is well presented, with clear performance indicators. It complements the council's corporate plan effectively and links clearly with corporate priorities. The Best Value Performance Plan provides a concise and realistic appraisal of the council's performance over the previous year, its progress in implementing Best Value action plans and its plans for further reviews. The plan also provides clear evidence of how council priorities have been delivered.

193. The council has good strategies in place for continually reviewing progress and identifying priorities. The recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2002 and points for action from this have informed council priorities. The executive also hold regular meetings with elected members, officers and representatives of the community to receive updates and discuss emerging issues. One good example of such a focus group is the council managers' forum.

194. The council has a satisfactory track record in successfully implementing its plans.

### **Decision making**

195. At the last inspection, the speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making were satisfactory and now are highly satisfactory. The council's financial strategy has ensured that government funding for education is passed on to schools.

196. The modernised council structure, in place since November 2002, has placed the responsibility for day-to-day decision making on to the executive. This is carried out effectively. The executive is supported by the full council and receives challenge through the work of the thirteen scrutiny and overview commissions. The chair of overview for lifelong learning is a long serving elected member and experienced in education. The overview commission has been very effective in considering and developing educational policies.

197. The education scrutiny commission is undergoing change, with a new appointment to the chair. It is not yet fully effective, partly because its members are less experienced in the workings of this commission. Five are new to the commission since the elections in May 2003. The scrutiny commission does not have a sufficiently structured approach to the way it identifies and prioritises educational issues or to the strategies for review and challenge.

198. There is a high level of delegated power to officers. Decisions with a cost of up to £200,000 are taken by the directors of departments. In education, decisions are made in a timely way after thorough audit and consultation with all partners. A similar process is evident at council level. Financial decisions within education are carried out with transparency, in consultation with schools.

199. The council structure and way of working are still being consolidated and as yet remain unfamiliar to some members of the local community. Schools are still unclear of the structures, working practice and involvement of the council in educational matters and decision-making. The recent change in structure and council operation has not yet gained the confidence of all members, headteachers and professional associations.

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**The leadership provided by officers and elected members**

200. In the last inspection, the quality of leadership provided by councillors was good. It is at present highly satisfactory. The elected members and executive have identified education as a clear priority and they give a clear sense of purpose and direction for education. However, the political structure is still new and working arrangements continue to develop. There remains some unhappiness among members about the new executive arrangements.

201. Members of the overview commission are supportive in educational decision-making, with recent examples including the reorganisation of primary places and approval of the information technology strategy. However, too many members of the education scrutiny commission are new to educational issues.

202. The quality of advice provided to members and the executive is generally good. Structured meetings are planned between the director of education or his representative and the executive. The assistant director of education meets monthly with the elected mayor and the director meets half yearly with the council manager to review performance. Chairs of the commission receive regular reports from officers across the department. Virtually all members are active on schools' governing bodies which provide a mechanism for updating and exchanging of information. The council manager has a management team for all directors and a council manager forum for councillors to discuss and share issues. Members feel well informed and advised on education matters.

203. The quality of leadership provided by senior officers is presently good. There is a strong commitment to school improvement across the department. Officers are committed to delivering and achieving the priorities outlined in the wide range of educational plans including; the EDP 2, planning for national strategies and Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone plans.

204. Good communication and relationships exist between the LEA and schools, which are positive about the lead received from senior officers.

205. The director of education's leadership is valued and recognised as excellent by many service personnel across the council and by external partners. The good progress made since the last inspection is due in no small way to his drive and enthusiasm for improvement. The senior management team, headed by the director of education, comprises ten officers in second and third tier posts. Despite this large management structure, the director of education, along with providing strategic vision, is heavily involved in operational management of key areas including SEN, social inclusion and secondary school target-setting.

***Recommendation*****In order to improve the strategic capacity of the department:**

- review the senior management structure, and redress the allocation of roles in order to reduce the dependence on the director.

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## Partnership

206. At the last inspection partnerships between the LEA and other agencies was good and it continues to be so. The development of partnerships and their strategic importance is embedded in the priorities and planning by council and education and lifelong learning department.

207. A powerful force in partnership working is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), which was formally accredited in February 2002. The LSP has produced two key documents, the *neighbourhood renewal strategy* and more recently the *community strategy*. Both are good plans. Together they provide a clear vision and direction for partnership working in Stoke towards a common aim of regeneration and renewal. The LSP oversees and manages effectively the funding streams for neighbourhood renewal and regeneration budgets.

208. A Children and Young Peoples' Partnership has recently been established which has the full support and commitment from the management board and the council. Young people play a major part in the partnership with two members on the LSP board and two on each of the LSP sub-groups.

209. The LEA has developed good partnerships with its schools. Schools are working well together on several initiatives. For example, the Excellence in Cities developments are a result of good collaboration and partnership between all high schools. Links with post-16 and higher educational establishments have been enhanced further through planning for the pending Aim higher Excellence Challenge initiative.

210. Multi agency and external partnerships are well established and continue to develop. One example of excellent partnership and collaborative working exists in the Private Finance Initiative which is funding the renewal or rebuild of schools by 2005, and their maintenance up to 2025.

211. Links with the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) are sound. The Council fulfils all its statutory requirements, has produced a good annual report and includes representatives from all religious and community members across Stoke. The SACRE is at present undertaking a review of the agreed syllabus and intends to produce one specific to Stoke-on-Trent.

## Support for early years

212. The support for early years is highly satisfactory and at times good. The Early Years Development Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) is well established, with good links between education and social services. Staff and managers in the early years settings have a clear understanding of the roles expected of the EYDCP.

213. The EYDCP has made good progress in establishing itself; its management and organisational structure are effective, with the full partnership board meeting quarterly and additional support and advice coming from four working sub-groups. Its strategic and operational plans are detailed and clearly outline local targets in line with government strategic goals and targets. These plans link closely to EDP 2, which also has clear actions

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and outcomes for addressing early years provision. The 2004 targets set for provision of places for three and four year olds also have already been met.

214. Provision across the city varies, including maintained nursery schools and nursery classes, non-maintained nursery centres and six Sure Start programmes. A high proportion of the nursery classes in the maintained sector are staffed by nursery nurses rather than qualified teachers.

215. The LEA provides a good, structured training and support programme for non-maintained early years providers. A team of 17 outreach teachers provides three days' support a year for each setting. This is proving very effective.

216. Support for SEN is satisfactory. Settings presently have access to one special educational needs coordinator who supports each site as required. This provision is soon to be expanded to three coordinators. There is, however, a concern in schools about a lack of early years expertise within the SEN support provision. The maintained nursery schools have formed a network for disseminating and sharing good practice and use external trainers to ensure variety and high quality training.

217. The LEA has ensured that good assessment procedures are in place and the maintained settings have used a commercial package effectively for several years. The LEA has now developed a good set of support materials for planning and assessing in the foundation stage. These will enhance the progress of children from early years into foundation stage. The LEA has now identified the area of transition from foundation to key stage 1 for some development and pilot work.

### **Support for 14-19 education**

218. Support for the 14-19 curriculum and the development of partnership work is highly satisfactory and in some cases good.

219. Stoke-on-Trent underwent an area wide 16-19 inspection in October 2002 and the findings and areas for action have provided the structure for the council's 14-19 strategy. The 14-19 strategy incorporates fully the post-inspection action plan. The plan addresses the key issues and provides a clear strategy for moving the 14-19 agenda forward. The developments in 14-19 education provide a good example of partnership work towards a common goal. Links with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are good, as are those with important partners such as high schools, local colleges, universities, Connexions and local industry.

220. Stoke LEA is a strong partner and well represented on the regional 14-19 steering group which manages the Staffordshire 14-19 strategy. Since the area wide inspection, Stoke LEA established its own 14-19 strategy group, which is leading on the policy for developments in the city. Widening participation post-16 and improving staying-on rates are major priorities and are embedded in key strategic plans and targets, including the EDP 2 and Local Public Service Agreement.

221. Plans are in place to form a collegiate management board which will bring together the key partners in Stoke and will monitor progress of the 14-19 strategy. The Aimhigher Excellence Challenge board will be incorporated into this structure.

222. The LSC is funding some good short-term projects in the LEA which are aimed at increasing awareness of post-16 opportunities among the current Year 11 students. Projects include increased access and time from learning mentors during summer holidays, a clearing house system after publication of results and a skills fair for those young people unsure of career routes.

223. Raising attainment at Key Stage 4 is a priority for the LEA. In partnership with local colleges and companies, alternative course and programmes are being offered, including applied GCSEs and extended work placements, with the intention of increasing participation and raising standards.

## **Appendix 1: Recommendations**

The report makes a number of recommendations.

### **In order to improve the LEA's work with under-performing schools:**

- with the reduction in the number of schools designated as requiring special measures and having serious weaknesses, apply the same rigorous level of support to reduce the long tail of under-performing schools; and
- ensure that the lead officer for each school evaluates the progress being made, identifies what needs to be done to remove the school from the category of concern and ensures that governors are properly informed about the school's issues and progress.

### **In order to improve the support provided in Key Stage 3:**

- ensure that the needs of able learners are given greater prominence in the Key Stage 3 strategy and ensure a close link with the LEA's strategy for gifted and talented pupils.

### **In order to improve the support for gifted and talented pupils:**

- revise the LEA strategy and guidance for gifted and talented pupils to ensure that it identifies clear targets and effective support for staff and pupils in primary schools; and
- ensure that all schools have a comprehensive approach to identifying and developing their able and talented pupils.

### **In order to safeguard the objectivity of the work of the parent partnership officer:**

- enable a senior member of staff who is not directly involved in the assessment and placement of children with SEN to line manage the parent partnership officer.

### **In order to improve the deployment of SEN funding to support the priority for social inclusion:**

- review the way in which funding is devolved to schools for statements of special educational needs; and
- introduce regular monitoring of schools' expenditure on special needs within the SEN audit.

### **In order to improve the quality of school place planning:**

- conduct a further review of primary provision, taking full account of the potential for community use of school buildings; and
  - specify clearly how the actions proposed in the school organisation plan will contribute to school improvement and other corporate priorities.
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**In order to improve the provision for pupils who have no school place:**

- take steps to increase the rate of reintegration of pupils on the roll of the Ed Start into mainstream schools.

**In order to improve the educational opportunities for pupils with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties to attend school in their local area:**

- actively explore the options which are available locally and regionally to extend the day provision which is available for these pupils

**In order to improve the LEA's support for behaviour and discipline in schools:**

- set out clearly the initiatives which are available including a description of the activities and the circumstances in which they could be most helpfully be used and providing some case studies of effective practice;
- develop packages of support using a combination of the different initiatives which can be systematically used in schools;
- disseminate this to schools; and
- identify with schools any gaps in the support and commission work which will help to fill the gaps.

**In order to ensure that children are safeguarded from significant harm:**

- add the date of the most recent training to the database of the names of designated teachers and adopt more formal means of alerting headteachers when the training of designated teachers requires up-dating.

**In order to improve the liaison between social workers and teachers:**

- take steps to identify more precisely the reasons for schools' concerns and familiarise schools with the threshold employed by social services to determine appropriate referrals; and
- circulate to schools lists of services which may provide preventive support for parents and children who fall outside the remit of social services and yet require some support.

**In order to improve the attainment of children who are looked after by local authorities:**

- ensure that personal education programmes are drafted for all children who are looked after by the local authority.

**In order to improve the strategic capacity of the department:**

- review the senior management structure, and redress the allocation of roles in order to reduce the dependence on the director.
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## Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

Name of LEA :	Stoke-on-Trent
LEA number:	
Name of Inspector:	Brian Sharples
Date of Inspection:	June 2003

No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	NI
<b>SECTION 1 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY</b>			
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	6	
	The performance of schools	5	
3	Funding, including the co-ordination of external funding	3	
4	The LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP and EiC	3	
5	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP and EiC	3	
6	The extent to which the LEA targets its resources on priorities	3	
7	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement including Best Value	3	
<b>SECTION 2 SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT</b>			
8	The extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge, and intervention and shared those understandings with schools	2	
9	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	2	
10	the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data	2	
11	The effectiveness of LEA identification of and intervention in under-performing schools	3	
12	Support to schools for raising standards in Literacy		3
13	Support to schools for raising standards in Numeracy	2	

14	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology		3
<b>No.</b>	<b>Required Inspection Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>NI</b>
15	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	4	
16	Support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children including the effective deployment of the ethnic minority and Traveller achievement grants	3	
17	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	4	
18	Support for school leadership and management including support for schools effort to achieve Best Value		3
19	Support to school governors		4
20	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	2	
20a	Financial services	1	
20b	Human resources	1	
20c	Property services	2	
20d	Services for ICT in school administration	3	
20e	Cleaning and caretaking	2	
20f	Grounds maintenance	3	
20g	Catering	2	
21	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	2	
22	The effectiveness of the leadership of services to support school improvement	2	
23	The effectiveness of the deployment of staff to support school improvement	3	
24	The effectiveness of strategic planning of services to support school improvement	3	
25	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support school improvement	3	
26	The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement	2	
27	The effectiveness of services to school improvement	3	

28	Value for money of services to support school improvement	3	
<b>SECTION 3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS</b>			
29	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN	4	
30	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	4	
31	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	3	
32	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	4	
<b>SECTION 4 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION</b>			
33	The overall effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion	4	
34	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	3	
<b>No.</b>	<b>Required Inspection Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>NI</b>
35	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	2	
36	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	2	
37	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to provision for pupils who have no school place	4	
38	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	2	
39	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school	4	
40	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to health and safety, welfare and child protection	3	
41	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to children in public care	3	
42	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	3	
<b>SECTION 5 CORPORATE ISSUES</b>			
43	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans	3	
44	The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans	3	

45	The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making (particularly financial decision-making)	3	
46	The quality of leadership provided by elected members	3	
47	The quality of the leadership provided by senior officers	2	
48	The quality of advice given to elected members	2	
49	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies	2	
<b>OVERALL JUDGEMENTS</b>			
50	The progress made by the LEA overall	2	
51	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	3	
52	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	3	

JRS numerical judgements are allocated on a 1 to 7 point scale:

- Grade 1 – Very good
- Grade 2 – Good
- Grade 3 – Highly satisfactory
- Grade 4 – Satisfactory
- Grade 5 – Unsatisfactory
- Grade 6 – Poor, significant weaknesses
- Grade 7 – Very poor, fails to provide effective support to schools