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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

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

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation, and on discussions with members, staff in the education and other council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 62 per cent.

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

COMMENTARY

4. The metropolitan borough of Stockport serves a mainly suburban area, south east of Manchester. Its population is largely white and the borough is basically a prosperous place, although with some areas of disadvantage. At the ages of 7, 11, 14 and 16, the pupils' test and examination scores are above the national average. Nevertheless, considerable effort will be needed for the schools to meet the local education authority's target for results in the GCSE. Although last year saw a leap forward, the GCSE results have been improving slower than nationally. There are also some pockets of low attainment in the borough. These are in the less prosperous areas and present the LEA with the problem of differentiating its support for the schools according to widely varying need.

5. Until two years ago, no political party had overall control of the council. Despite this, the council showed a strong commitment to education which continues today and is evident in spending on schools at a level above the borough's very low standard spending assessment. Combined with sound administration, this commitment has led to the steady development of good policy and practice across a wide range of the LEA's functions where strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. The majority party is now formulating an overall strategy for the borough to draw together its strong and independent departments into a corporate whole. This has yet to be embedded in the planning process. An important start has been made, but there is much to be done before the LEA's newly declared strategic vision directly influences educational outcomes.

6. The following functions are particular strengths:

- the provision of monitoring, challenge and support for the schools;
- the leadership of school improvement work together with the deployment and expertise of the staff involved in the work;
- support for literacy and numeracy;
- support for school management and governance;
- support for schools causing concern;
- support for early years;
- support for gifted and talented pupils;
- the processes for making decisions and developing policy;
- the arrangements for admissions to schools;
- personnel support for school management;
- the provision for education other than at school;
- the arrangements for health, safety, welfare and child protection;
- support for young people in public care; and

- the strategy for special educational needs, along with school improvement work in this area, the support for children from the earliest years and the value for money which the combined support provides.

Amongst these, the services providing support for vulnerable pupils are exceptionally consistent in their effectiveness.

7. The LEA's other functions are fulfilled in ways which are at least satisfactory and often good, but the following are weak:

- support for the management uses of information and communication technology;
- the provision of financial information for schools' management;
- target-setting for minority ethnic pupils; and
- the implementation of plans to promote racial harmony.

8. The LEA collaborates well with nearly all of its external partners and, within the borough, works well with the social services department. Communications with, and consultation of the schools are good. The education department makes good use of the compact geography of the borough and its short lines of communication.

9. Although the LEA's performance management system is not fully operational, its services operate in a climate of evaluation and improvement. Nevertheless, the varied quality of the management support services provided for schools shows some failings in quality assurance. However, it is clear that the LEA has the capacity to deal with its weaknesses and to act on the recommendations made in this report.

10. Stockport is a good LEA with few areas of significant weakness. It successfully sets out to meet its statutory duties. Although there is some way to go to promote schools' independence further, for example through increased delegation, most of the authority's services are strong and its costs are low. It provides good value for money.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

11. The Metropolitan Borough of Stockport is a compact and mainly suburban area to the south east of Manchester. It has a population of about 293,000. In many respects the population is prosperous. The 1991 census figures showed that 17.4 per cent had higher educational qualifications, compared with 13.5 per cent nationally and that 39.9 per cent are in high social classes, compared with 31 per cent nationally. Reflecting this pattern, 15.4 per cent of primary and 15.1 per cent of secondary pupils are eligible for free school meals, compared with 20.5 and 18.1 per cent nationally. Prosperous though the area is on average, there are still parts of it where there is poverty. The LEA's figures show that the percentage of eligibility for free school meals varies from 0.3 to 58.4 in different schools. Only 4.1 per cent of the pupils are from minority ethnic groups, compared with 12.2 per cent nationally.

12. The school population is 41,325. The LEA has nine nursery schools, 103 primary schools, of which 45 have nursery classes, 14 high schools for 11-16 year old pupils, six special schools and three pupil referral units (PRU). Post-16 education is provided in sixth form colleges or the further education college and 72 per cent of pupils stay on after the age of 16.

13. Statements of special educational need (SEN) are maintained for 2.2 per cent of primary pupils and 4 per cent of secondary pupils. The figure for primary pupils is below the national figure (2.7 per cent); that for secondary pupils is the same as the national figure. One per cent of Stockport's primary pupils is in special schools, again the same as the national figure. The percentage of secondary pupils in special schools is 2.0 per cent compared with 1.5 per cent nationally.

Performance

14. School inspection evidence shows that pupils' attainment on entry to education is average overall, although a larger than average proportion of pupils start school with high attainment. At the end of Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils achieving at least Level 2 is above national averages in reading and mathematics and well above in writing. It is in line with the average in similar LEAs in reading and mathematics and above them in writing. In Key Stage 1, improvement has been broadly in line with that in similar LEAs in reading, writing and mathematics. The LEA is in line with the national trends in reading, but below the national trend in writing and mathematics. At the end of Key Stage 2 the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 or above in 2000 in English was 79 per cent compared with 75 nationally. In mathematics it was 75 per cent compared with 72 nationally. In science it was 86 per cent compared with 85 nationally.

Since 1996, the rates of improvement at the end of Key Stage 2 have been below the national trend in mathematics and well below in English and science. The rates of improvement have also been below those in similar LEAs in each of the core subjects. The LEA, however, is set to meet its targets for literacy and numeracy in the Key Stage 2 tests.

15. In Key Stage 3, the proportion of pupils achieving at least Level 5 is above the national average in English, mathematics and science. It is in line with averages in similar LEAs in mathematics and science, but fell below average in English in 1999, and well below in 2000. The rates of improvement have been below those in similar LEAs in each subject, in line with the national rate in mathematics but below this in English and science. At the end of Key Stage 4, 52 per cent of pupils achieved five or more higher GCSE passes in 2000; this is above the national average but below the average in similar LEAs. The rate of improvement since 1996 has been well below that nationally, despite a significant improvement in 2000. Sixth form education is provided by the further education sector rather than the LEA. In 2000, 80.2 per cent of entries to advanced level GCSE achieved grades A-E.

16. In the most recent inspections, 78 per cent of primary schools, compared with 70 per cent nationally, were judged to be good or very good. Three per cent required significant improvement compared with four per cent doing so nationally. Eighty-six per cent of secondary schools compared with 66 per cent nationally were judged to be good or very good. None required significant improvement compared with six per cent nationally. Overall, the strengths considerably outweigh the weaknesses in the LEA's schools.

17. The rate of attendance is above the national average in primary schools and in line with it in secondary schools. Unauthorised absence is broadly in line with the national figure for both the primary and secondary phases. The permanent exclusion rate is above the national rate for primary schools and broadly in line with it for secondary schools.

18. Eight Beacon schools are maintained by the LEA. Four schools have been judged since 1993 to require special measures. Three of these have improved so that they no longer fall into this category. The other two schools were amalgamated into a 'Fresh Start' school. Three schools have been classified as having serious weaknesses, two of which have improved sufficiently and have been taken out of the category.

Funding

19. The Government's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil in Stockport is one of the lowest of all LEAs in the country. The council has partially compensated for this by funding education above the SSA for many years. In the current year, the education budget is £3.6 million more than the education SSA.

The overall spend per primary pupil is £1,716 compared to a metropolitan average of £1,795 and in secondary schools it is £2,338 compared with £2,471.

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02
Budget (£m)	91.4	103.5	106.4	112.4	113.2
SSA (£m)	89.6	99.3	104.5	110.0	116.8
Budget As % of SSA	102.0%	104.2%	101.9%	102.2%	103.2%

20. Stockport delegated a lower than average percentage of the local school budget (LSB) to schools in 2000/01: 82.7 per cent compared to a metropolitan average of 84.9 per cent and the national average 84.2 per cent. This is not because of high central costs. Expenditure on central administration costs is £29 per pupil, the lowest figure among all LEAs and, expenditure is lower than average in most other areas of central expenditure.

21. The main reason for the comparatively low level of delegation is high central expenditure on SEN. It is £219 per pupil compared with a metropolitan average £143. Part of this is budgeted expenditure on out of borough placements for pupils with SEN which is £46 per pupil, compared to the metropolitan average of £33 per pupil. Overall, the total of central and delegated expenditure on SEN is marginally below average. It is 14.95 per cent of the LSB compared to a metropolitan average 15.11 per cent. The balance between central and delegated expenditure on SEN is strongly supported by the primary schools but, after consultation, more money for SEN is now being delegated to secondary schools.

22. The LEA has met all of the DfES targets for delegation in the current and previous years. The target 85 per cent delegation in 2001/2 has been met by delegating insurance and the school library service to all schools and SEN expenditure to secondary schools. Expenditure areas to be further delegated have been agreed with schools following extensive consultation.

23. Capital expenditure was budgeted to be £8.7 million in 2001/2. This is about the metropolitan average per pupil. The low average level of deprivation means that the schools do not receive additional resources from some current Government programmes. However, some additional money has been obtained from the Single Regeneration Budget and for Sure Start, an Early Excellence Centre and two specialist schools.

Council structure

24. After an extended period in which there was no overall party majority, the Liberal Democrats gained control in 1999 and the current membership of the

council is Liberal Democrat 32, Labour 22, Conservative 6 and Independent 3. The council still has a committee structure but plans to move to a leader and executive organisation in October 2001.

25. There are distinctive and effective political structures in the area of education. There is an early years joint sub-committee comprising members of the education, social services and community services committees. This body facilitates the council's strategic work with young children by providing a forum for collaboration. There is a curriculum advisory group which provides a forum for discussion between officers and members on educational developments, recently, for example, on education otherwise than at school. The group makes recommendations to the full committee. There is also a monitoring panel in which members scrutinise educational developments, or indeed the work of single schools. The panel does not hold public meetings because of the delicacy of the matters with which it deals, but discussions with officers, members and headteachers show it to be a fair and rigorous body, making an effective contribution to school improvement. Members are properly concerned to seek ways in which these distinctive political functions can be maintained when the political organisation of the council is changed.

The Education Development Plan

26. The Education Development Plan (EDP) has seven priorities. They are:

- raising achievement for all;
- improving standards of literacy;
- improving standards of numeracy;
- using information and communication technology to support teaching and learning;
- supporting and monitoring school self-review;
- supporting, monitoring and challenging schools, including those causing concern; and
- increasing social inclusion.

27. The main emphases of the plan were initially defined by the education department's school improvement strategy group, a consultative body, comprising officers and headteachers' representatives. The schools visited during the inspection regarded themselves as having been consulted well by the LEA in the process of drawing up the EDP and the plan's priorities were seen as directly relevant to the school's own priorities in all but two of them.

28. The EDP is a clear and systematic document, but it has some weaknesses. The connection between the audit of strengths and weaknesses and the priorities is inconsistent. In some areas the link is a clear one, for example in the use of priority six (supporting, monitoring and challenging schools, including those causing concern) to respond to the LEA's 'pockets of

low achievement' which frequently coincide with social deprivation. In others it is much weaker. For example, the audit does not show why early years should be a priority, nor does it show why 'active citizenship' should feature in the activity plans for priority one, although this latter area has been a longstanding emphasis in educational development in the borough. Where there are attainment targets to be met, they are used as measures for assessing the LEA's success in implementing the plan but in other areas the plan does not use measurable success criteria enough.

29. Nevertheless, the arrangements for the evaluation of the EDP have produced a clear and useful report on the progress with its implementation which, by setting out the main activities to be undertaken at present under each of the priorities, serves as a means of keeping the plan up-to-date. Although some activities have not been achieved to time, for example, the production of a policy for able pupils was late, good progress has been made with most of the others. The work on school self-review illustrates this well. In raising attainment in literacy and numeracy and in reducing exclusions, the LEA is making good progress towards its targets. The GCSE is the area of weakness. Despite the significant rise in 2000, the percentage of pupils with five or more A*-C passes was 52 per cent. There is a large gap to be made up if the LEA is to meet its 2002 target which is 56.5 per cent of pupils gaining passes at that level. The education department has responded to the shortfall by setting up a new initiative to improve teaching and learning in the secondary schools. It is clearly acting upon performance figures and the evaluation of the plan, but that response has yet to show an effect on pupils' performance.

The allocation of resources to priorities

30. The LEA is effective in allocating resources to priorities. It gives a high priority to education spending and keeps tight control of central expenditure. The budget clearly shows the priority attached to school improvement and social inclusion. Furthermore, individual services, for example the advisory service and educational psychology, manage their budgets so as to meet the varying needs of schools. The schools themselves are consulted effectively about spending priorities.

31. The formula for distributing resources to individual schools is being reviewed to link it more closely to their needs. Although primary schools are currently concerned about their relative level of funding, the ratio of funding per pupil between secondary and primary is in line with the average for other metropolitan authorities. Consultants have been used to help the review and a working party is making effective progress with schools to make changes in 2002.

32. The resources to meet SEN are clearly identified and schools are consulted on the balance between central and delegated resources. Secondary

schools want the formula for distributing resources to relate more to the variation in need between schools. Central and school-based resources for SEN are deployed effectively to meet the needs of individual pupils.

33. The money delegated to schools for Additional Educational Needs (AEN) is lower than in most authorities but is kept clearly separate from money for SEN. Additionally, the council is increasing the amount of money for AEN over several years and services are delivered so as to promote social inclusion.

The approach to Best Value

34. The local authority has a positive approach to the development of Best Value, but the processes have not yet had a significant impact on education. Members and officers take the processes seriously. Best Value Performance Plans (BVPP) have now been in place for the last two years. The district auditor regarded the first plan as satisfactory and the current plan is comprehensive and clear. A range of national and local performance indicators are in the plan and arrangements are in place for members to monitor progress against the indicators.

35. A programme of Best Value Reviews has been agreed which will deal with all aspects of the education service. This is part of a programme of reviews which will cover the full range of the council's services. Priorities were chosen on the basis of a set of criteria which include complaints from the public and dealing with the worst first. A review of central information and communication technology (ICT) services, including services for schools, has been completed and is currently being inspected by the Best Value inspection service. The action plan focuses on some of the areas of weakness in supporting schools which are identified later in the report. A review of nursery education is currently in progress. Extensive work has been carried out, but conclusions had not been reached nor an action plan agreed at the time of this inspection.

Recommendations

- Improve education development planning by strengthening the link between the strengths and weaknesses evident in the schools and the proposed activities, and by making more effective use of quantifiable success criteria to measure progress in implementing the plan.
- Improve the challenge to, and support for, secondary schools in order to raise attainment in the GCSE.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

36. In addition to the support for schools provided for under the EDP, most of the LEA's other services make a positive contribution to school improvement. Its personnel services, its arrangements for school admissions, for planning school places and its support for meeting SEN are strong. The emphasis which the authority places on the promotion of social inclusion leads to effective work in support for young people in public care, in the promotion of the health, safety and welfare of children and in support for gifted and talented pupils. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses in the contribution to school improvement made by the provision of ICT support and financial information for school management, in target-setting for ethnic minority pupils and in measures to combat racism.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

37. The procedures for monitoring, challenging and intervening in schools are clearly outlined in the LEA's protocol for its relationship with schools and in other published documents, including the EDP. Headteachers have been properly consulted and the level of acceptance of the protocol is high. The criteria for allocating support to schools according to their needs are clear.

38. There is an effective scheme for the annual monitoring of all schools. In addition to analysing data, advisers make up to three monitoring visits per year to schools and schools causing concern receive more attention, in proportion to need. Advisers discuss staff and pupil performance, planning, curriculum, teaching methods and targets with the senior staff of the schools. The effective monitoring enables the LEA to detect problems and react promptly. The advisers' notes of school visits contain detailed evaluation and are helpful records of decisions made. Advisers routinely report their judgements to headteachers.

39. The advisers have the expertise, credibility and information about schools' performance to be able to challenge the schools in all phases. Most headteachers believe that the LEA strikes a good balance between challenge and support.

40. The support provided is necessarily limited by the modest level of funding for the advisory service, but it is authoritative and reasonably wide ranging. Gaps in advisory expertise have recently been filled and, where they remain, the education department gives schools good advice about external sources of help.

41. The advisory service has adapted well to the Government's requirement to work on school improvement according to the needs of individual schools. The

14 advisers are led well by the deputy chief education officer, assisted by a senior adviser. This arrangement emphasises the priority given to school improvement by the LEA. It also results in some lack of clarity in line management responsibility. This does not render this well managed service any less effective but it does make managing the service more difficult resulting, for example, in the lack of formal appraisal procedures for advisers, even though their work is regularly evaluated. The service is guided by the priorities of the EDP as well as the differing needs of the individual schools, and service planning is effective in deploying both the centrally-funded advisory work and that purchased by the schools. The service managers evaluate the effectiveness of the service and its staff using a range of evidence, including headteachers' perceptions of the impact of the service on their schools. In this small and tightly knit LEA, this works well. All of the schools purchase the support of the advisory service. This reflects their considerable satisfaction with its quality. Advisers are rightly very highly regarded by the headteachers. Given the low cost of the service, its spread of general and specialist expertise and its effectiveness, it provides good value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

42. The LEA has improved its provision for the collation and analysis of performance data and for target-setting in recent years. Despite some weaknesses, there are also strengths and the service is highly satisfactory overall. The survey showed that secondary headteachers regard it as good and primary headteachers regard it as quite good.

43. Schools are given a good range of useful performance data, together with the necessary guidance on its interpretation and use. Early years' assessment procedures are developing, and all primary schools use a common system of baseline assessment. The LEA carries out comprehensive analysis of test and examination results for each key stage. The schools find this information very useful in reviewing the curriculum, for example when comparing secondary subject departments. In one of the schools visited this had revealed that standards in a major department, previously seen as effective, were lower than they should have been. Secondary headteachers have agreed to share information on attainment and so improve their insight into school performance by making comparisons between schools. Primary headteachers have so far not agreed to this openness and this limits their capacity to understand the relative performance of their schools. Many of the schools visited use data effectively and most are developing clear procedures for tracking the progress of individual pupils.

44. Procedures for target-setting are clear and the LEA gives strong practical support to schools. The schools value this and nearly all of those visited reported that they are challenged when their targets are too low. In one of them, however, the targets remain too low. Also, two headteachers were concerned

that the LEA's approach was too driven by numerical targets, paying insufficient attention to detailed knowledge of the past performance of pupils and cohorts.

45. Data on ethnic minorities, and related target-setting is underdeveloped. In both special and mainstream schools the development of new assessment systems for pupils with SEN (P scales) is improving the quality of target-setting and has the potential to provide the schools and the LEA with improved means of comparing performance within and across settings.

Support for literacy

46. Support for literacy has made a good contribution to maintaining and improving standards of attainment and the quality of teaching. The LEA is on line to achieve its challenging target of 85 per cent reaching at least Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 tests in 2002. In 2000, the figure of 79 per cent exceeded the year's target by three percentage points. In the schools' survey, support for literacy was rated better than good by secondary and better than satisfactory by primary schools. This endorsement supports the evidence of the school visits that support for literacy in Stockport schools is very good.

47. The LEA analyses data well to identify where support should be focused. For instance, at Key Stage 3 where there is a dip in standards and in schools where results fluctuate. Primary schools receiving intensive support for literacy have made good progress in raising standards. Support for teaching literacy in Key Stage 3 is well targeted on literacy across the curriculum and building on the primary National Literacy Strategy (NLS).

48. The NLS was introduced effectively in primary schools, and recently it has been further developed by the LEA, which has encouraged schools to adapt it to their particular needs. One school visited, with a large percentage of pupils with special needs and few more able, developed a highly differentiated approach. Another with established good practice in teaching independent writing continued with its methods. Both of these adaptations resulted in standards rising.

49. The LEA has made a good start on supporting literacy in secondary schools as it seeks to tackle the dip in attainment in Key Stage 3. All schools have already been briefed about the NLS and the evaluation of the summer schools' initiative has been disseminated. The LEA is working with schools to focus on areas for development. For example, the education department and schools have collaborated on literacy audits and target-setting for Key Stage 3 is based on Key Stage 2 data.

50. The NLS is well managed and staffed by an expert, enthusiastic and committed team. Link advisers monitor the implementation of the literacy strategy and a joint development panel for literacy and numeracy acts as a good

sounding board, helping to give local direction to the national initiatives. The literacy team collaborates effectively with the learning support service, with the ICT team and with teachers of English as an additional language. More generally, the sharing of good practice is a particular strength. It is done through meetings of literacy co-ordinators and leading literacy teachers as well as through a newsletter and other practical publications. There is also a well-stocked reference library to help schools in their selection of resources. The school library service supports literacy well by providing good quality reading material through an easily accessed range of lending and purchasing facilities.

Support for numeracy

51. Schools are supported well in raising standards in numeracy. They rated it better than satisfactory in the schools' survey. The rationale for the strategy is clearly stated in the EDP and the linked numeracy action plan. The target that by 2002, 81 per cent of pupils leaving primary school should gain Level 4 or better is attainable. Indeed, the results for 2000 exceeded the interim target of 76.2 per cent by four percentage points. There is a dip in attainment at the end of Key Stage 3; this has been made a focus of work by the LEA.

52. The National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) has bedded down well in primary schools where it has improved standards and the quality of teaching. Secondary schools are well-informed about developments and are ready to build on the progress made by pupils in primary schools. A thorough analysis of data and trends informed the selection of primary schools for intensive support that was tailored to meet their identified needs. Consultants meet regularly with headteachers and numeracy co-ordinators to plan, review and adjust provision. Certain secondary schools have been identified for additional support.

53. The management of the strategy is good. The mathematics adviser leads the initiative supported by a good team. Courses have been provided to link mathematics with ICT, science, early years and SEN and the team has, like the literacy team, collaborated with the English as an additional language and learning support services.

54. A range of differentiated support has been provided for schools. This includes using the Mathematics Recovery scheme in intensive schools on a one-to-one basis with pupils which has proved effective in raising standards and developing transferable teaching skills that can be used with the whole class. Schools can buy in to a good range of courses and there is a mathematics resource library which helps schools by providing an opportunity to review resources before purchasing. As with literacy, there are effective arrangements for spreading good practice and work in secondary schools has been informed by research, for example in an interactive teaching project with Manchester Metropolitan University.

Support for Information and Communication Technology

55. The LEA support for ICT has some strengths but a lack of strategic direction and coherence, together with the fragmentation and unreliability of the support, has reduced its impact. Support for the curricular use of ICT is satisfactory overall, but stronger for primary than for secondary schools. That for the management use of ICT is weak.

56. Strategic planning for ICT at a corporate level is weak. Despite this, the education department has recently drawn up a good strategy for the development of ICT in the schools which is in tune with current government policy and the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). The NGfL strategy is well thought out. It pays due attention to teaching and learning and is based on a detailed audit of ICT in schools conducted in 1997. School inspections show that pupils make good progress in ICT in Key Stages 1 and 2 in twice as many schools in Stockport as they do nationally. In Key Stages 3 and 4, pupils make good progress in a similar proportion of schools to nationally. The LEA's strategy aims to develop ICT capability beyond this, raising pupils' capability to use ICT to learn all subjects and improving management, planning and resourcing in schools.

57. The implementation of this strategy is made complex by the very wide variety of ICT provision among its schools, the separation of its support into three strands covering curricular, administrative and technical issues and the three categories of service level agreements with schools who purchase the LEA's support. Overall, primary headteachers are highly satisfied with the support given but a significant minority are critical of the clarity of the strategy, the allocation of funding, technical support and infrastructure provision. These criticisms are only partly justified. The LEA goes to some lengths to assess the needs of each school and to allocate resources accordingly. It gives good curricular support to primary schools and its strong and effective primary ICT team has been very active in promoting schools' auditing and planning, identifying staff competence, and providing training and guidance in the monitoring of teaching. NGfL money has improved the resourcing of ICT in the LEA's primary schools but there remains a large gap in capacity to use this resourcing effectively between the most and least advanced schools, which the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training is aimed to bridge.

58. Support for secondary schools has been more limited although headteachers regard it, overall, as satisfactory. NGfL money has made a big difference to ICT provision in some schools. Training has recently been largely provided through NOF; schools have chosen their own providers but some have had difficulties in doing so. Information and communication technology co-ordinators are well supported with technical advice but not in information on hardware and service providers. There is support for ICT development but it has not helped schools to focus on the required detail. For example, there is too little

practical advice on establishing the relationship between the specialist teaching of ICT and the use of the technology across the curriculum. Schools are assembling portfolios of assessed work, but moderation of teachers' assessments of Key Stage 3 between schools is not rigorous enough.

59. Some progress has been made in developing a communications infrastructure to assist schools with their curriculum ICT. They have ISDN lines and the LEA has acted as an internet service provider. However, reliability problems have frustrated school use of the Internet. Reliability has recently improved and plans are now being developed for broadband connections for libraries and schools. Implementation dates for this are uncertain, partly because the LEA was uncertain until recently that it could afford the work, but also because of delays in the development of the north west consortium.

60. Progress in the management use of ICT has been less satisfactory. At a school level, standard commercial packages are being used for financial and data management. Many schools are also making effective use of the range of packages which run on their schools' databases to manage assessment, attendance and other functions. The LEA support unit has provided support to schools in developing these uses. The electronic collection of pupil census data has been successfully piloted and plans are in place to extend it out to all schools for 2002.

61. The central data held by the LEA in many areas is good. Currently, the LEA is bringing this together into an information strategy which will enable schools to communicate information electronically, and to use this information effectively to reduce the bureaucratic burden on schools. The current weaknesses, many of which were identified in the Best Value Review of central ICT, include:

- the lack, until recently, of a clear strategy for electronic information management between schools and the LEA;
- a lack of investment in equipment and expertise centrally in the LEA;
- uncertainty over the software that will be used for data management in the long term;
- weaknesses in the links with school administrative systems which are intended to enable electronic communication to take place, for example for the transfer of attainment data from Key Stage 2 to enable effective planning of teaching in Year 7; and
- a lack of coherence in the technical support which is provided from a number of different sources.

62. In recent months, the LEA has begun to make positive progress in improving administrative ICT. The Best Value Review has led to decisions to recruit central staff with relevant experience. Software which could meet the data management needs is about to be piloted in a small number of schools.

Technical support services are being reviewed to see how they can meet the needs of schools more effectively.

Support for schools causing concern

63. The LEA gives effective support to schools causing concern. It has a sharp awareness of the needs of the schools and provides authoritative, practical support and challenge.

64. Since 1993 four schools have been in special measures. Currently there are none in the category. Two identified as having serious weaknesses have improved enough to be removed from the category. One further school has recently been designated as having serious weaknesses.

65. Additionally, the LEA has identified 11 primary schools as causing some concern and two primary schools and one special school as causing more serious concern. The system for identifying these schools works well and the support or intervention delivered is tailored carefully and effectively to the needs of the schools, and delivered according to an action plan agreed between the link adviser and the school. The process is further helped by a school improvement network of the headteachers of the schools in the LEA's categories of concern, led by the general adviser for school improvement. The network's meetings give practical and relevant support to the headteachers as well as enabling officers to check the schools' progress and tailor support to their needs. Headteachers within the network regard the monitoring carried out by their link advisers very highly, together with their expert advice. Members too are involved in scrutinising progress through the monitoring panel of the education committee.

Support for governors

66. The support provided for governing bodies (GB) is strong. The schools' survey reveals a high level of satisfaction with the service provided, there is good take-up for training courses and the clerking service is bought back by all but one school.

67. A good range of relevant courses planned over two terms is provided for governors with useful reference material to support their work. Further effective training is provided for individual GBs or for area clusters. There is a promising trend of increasing attendance at courses. Information provided, particularly through the newsletter, is succinct and helpful. There is also a useful telephone help line. This and specialist officers in personnel and legal matters are responsive and provide effective support. Each GB has its own development plan and a designated governor with responsibility for developing expertise in governance.

68. The clerking service is bought back by GBs from the LEA. The service is extremely well regarded for its efficiency. The clerks are very well informed and provide a two-way channel of communication with the LEA. Link advisers have good contact with governors' service and information is routinely shared. Link advisers have helped to identify topics for governors' training. However, the advisers do not, except for schools causing concern, report the findings of their visits to GBs. This lack of information weakens governors' monitoring of their schools.

Support for school management

69. The LEA's support for school management is a considerable strength of its work. The support, and specifically the promotion of schools' self-review, is priority five of the EDP. In order to pursue it, the education department has produced a folder of written guidance on school improvement and has successfully promoted a training course which is based on the OFSTED self-review materials and has been attended by nearly all headteachers and many other senior managers in the schools. Additionally, this year link advisers are checking on schools' progress with self-review during their school visits. This has been a well-planned and systematically implemented initiative which has met with considerable success. Sixteen of the 18 schools visited had implemented a programme of self-review and the remaining two were about to do so. In some cases the work had preceded attendance at the training course but the headteachers of those schools reported that they had sharpened their approach, particularly to classroom observation, as a result of the course.

70. In addition to this work, there is a useful induction programme for newly appointed primary headteachers, consisting of a two-day course and a subsequent series of seminars. Those attending it spoke favourably of its responsiveness to their individual needs. The Investors in People scheme is encouraged by the LEA and an increasing number of schools are seeking the scheme's accreditation. The school visits showed the provision to support schools' middle managers to be good and that the link advisers are also seen as providing good management support. The LEA's Beacon schools also provide support to managers in other schools.

71. The education department supports the quality of teaching through a programme of in-service training courses which are attended well. The school visits also showed that newly qualified teachers are supported well, partly through courses but particularly through visits from the advisers.

72. The school visits provided some evidence of schools' finding increased difficulty in getting supply teachers to cover for staff attending training courses. More generally, recruitment and retention of teachers has not been a difficult

issue until recent months, but schools are now reporting greater difficulty in recruiting staff in some shortage subjects. The education department is developing strategies for recruitment and retention.

Support for early years

73. The LEA has a longstanding commitment to early years education that is reflected in the high quality of support given to public, private and voluntary sector nursery settings. This support has a good impact on teaching and curriculum development. There are sufficient part-time places for all three-year olds and full-time places from the September following children's fourth birthdays.

74. The LEA provides nursery schools and classes attached to primary schools. All classes of young children are taught by qualified teachers and the staffing level is adequate. Two integrated nurseries provide specialist SEN childcare. The council's disability database has been helpful in establishing this provision. A portage scheme is a valuable additional support for young children with special needs and their parents.

75. Nursery schools are being developed as early years excellence centres as part of the strategy to improve further the quality of provision. In one centre visited, nursery provision, family support services and adult education worked together successfully to provide education, care and support for young children and their parents and carers.

76. The well-regarded team of the early years adviser and two advisory teachers provides excellent support and training. It is sensibly to be enlarged to cover SEN and to develop self-evaluation. The early years development and childcare partnership is based on a thorough analysis of need and provision using information from a survey of parents' needs that included minority ethnic groups and schoolgirl mothers. The plan relates well to other education and corporate plans and its implementation is monitored regularly by senior officers and social services staff who report to relevant council committees.

Recommendations

- Improve the use of performance data by persuading primary headteachers to share benchmarking information as secondary headteachers do.
- Improve target-setting, and the underlying performance data, for pupils from ethnic minority groups so that schools make sufficient use of both in their planning.

- Develop the electronic transfer of information to enable an earlier distribution of the data to schools.
- Improve support for ICT in the curriculum by:
 - developing effective moderation procedures for teachers' assessment of pupils' ICT capability, especially at Key Stage 3; and
 - ensuring that all primary schools understand their own level of ICT competence, the curricular support available from the LEA, and are adequately informed to be able to buy – from the LEA or elsewhere – the support most fitted to their needs.
- Improve support for the management use of ICT by:
 - selecting data management software to meet future data needs effectively;
 - developing reliable electronic communication with schools, ensuring all schools have the equipment and capacity for this; and
 - working with schools to establish how the currently fragmented technical support can more effectively meet their needs.
- Improve governors' monitoring of their schools by providing them with notes of advisors' visits.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

77. The process of corporate planning and the definition of strategy in the metropolitan borough of Stockport as a whole, as well as in the education service, has been an evolving one. As successive elements of it have been formulated they have not always related to the already existing ones and so have not provided a clear strategic direction. The process of evolution has occurred in the context of developing national policy, for example the Best Value process, and in the context of developing local politics with the election of an overall majority party.

78. The highest level of strategy is now contained in a draft document, published in November 2000 and entitled '2020 Vision'. This defines the community strategy as to make the borough "cleaner, greener, safer, stronger," and sets out five "challenges" of which "developing learning communities" bears most closely on schools. The weakness in the strategy is that it is not clear how this vision translates into action. Some, but not all, of the schools visited were aware of the council's vision and three of the 18 saw it as relevant to their own values. For the remainder, the strategy was remote from their key concerns.

79. These weaknesses notwithstanding, the authority is seeking to clarify its strategic planning and has, most recently, produced its corporate plan 2001-2002 which attempts, at a very general level, to draw together the disparate elements of the developing planning process, including the BVPP and the education service plan. The latter is the highest level of planning in the education department and incorporates the school improvement work of the EDP in the broader context of the education department's work. It is a clear document in indicating the tasks to be carried forward by the different sections of the department but makes little use of measurable indicators of success in carrying out the proposed activities, except in the areas where statutory targets are set. It also illustrates the broader weakness of the arrangements for strategic planning because its statements of principle pre-date and so do not yet relate to the council's new vision.

80. The corporate plan sets out a framework for performance management although the system is too new to be fully operational. In the matter of evaluation, the authority has some strengths to build on. At a corporate level, the council sought an evaluation of its organisational performance from the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency and, in response to the report, has produced a useful action plan. The evaluation of the EDP illustrates some good practice in the education department itself, and the formulation of the BVPP has led to a clearer definition of measures of performance. The pre-

conditions for the LEA to sharpen its management of performance have been met, although a formal system has yet to be implemented.

81. Despite the weaknesses in strategic planning, the decision making process, including that on budgetary matters, is open, brisk and effective. Members are given clear and useful advice, both orally and in writing.

82. The leadership provided for the educational community by the chief education officer and his senior colleagues is strong and effective. Communication between officers, between officers and schools, and between the schools themselves is good. The education department has good arrangements for both continuing and more *ad hoc* consultation with the schools on both operational and policy matters through a series of groups of officers, teachers and governors, and through representative groups of primary and secondary headteachers. There is a strategic forum which meets regularly to determine policy and there are specific groups dedicated to developing policy on school improvement and fair funding. These consultative structures were revealed as effective in discussion with headteachers and on the school visits.

83. There is good collaboration at a strategic and operational level between the council's social services and education departments. This is particularly productive in early year's provision, in supporting pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers, in supporting young people in public care and in a scheme to support pupils with drug problems. Beyond the council's own departments, the education department works successfully with the health service, the local careers guidance company, and with post-16 education providers. These bodies report good operational relationships with the LEA and several note recent developments and improvements in collaboration, for example in current work to ensure that the medical contributions to SEN assessment take place as quickly as possible.

84. Not all consultation with the diocesan authorities is effective. There are regular operational meetings between the parties but, hitherto, strategic consultation has been weak.

Management services

85. There is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in management support for schools. The education department seeks the information it needs to improve its services through surveys of schools and through reviews of the quality of the services. However, the variation in the effectiveness of the services shows that the authority's quality assurance procedures are not sufficiently robust. Moreover, so far it has provided very limited advice on alternative suppliers of services.

86. There is a handbook of services to schools. It provides a clear description of all the services the schools can purchase and sets out the service agreements. Most of the agreements have the limitation that they are only for a single level of service, but officers are currently negotiating with schools with a view to providing more flexible arrangements for the next contract period.

Financial support services

87. These services have a number of strengths, including the financial advice for schools about managing their budgets, but problems with the financial information provided to schools in recent months make their overall quality unsatisfactory.

88. There have been delays in producing staffing profiles following changes to the national salary and grading structure for teachers, inaccurate coding of staffing costs to individual schools and slowness in making necessary corrections. There has also been difficulty in reconciling information between the council and school financial information systems, delays in the posting of paid invoices to the council financial system, and a reduced frequency in producing statements of Standards Fund expenditure. There have also been inaccuracies in the Standards Fund statements. These problems have created unnecessary work for schools and caused difficulties for them in monitoring their budgets. They have not, however, resulted in a lack of financial control or in budget deficits in schools. The LEA is aware of the problems and action is being taken to rectify them.

89. Schools that buy the financial support package are given effective advice in managing their budgets. At the end of 1999/2000, no secondary schools or special schools had deficits greater than 2.5 per cent of their budgets. Nearly 8 per cent of primary schools had deficits of greater than 2.5 per cent of their budgets. The financial position of these schools mostly reflected falling school rolls, and schools are taking corrective action to manage their budgets and have licensed recovery plans. Overall levels of surpluses are around £3 million and procedures are in place for schools to identify spending plans where surpluses are greater than three per cent of budget. A loans pool scheme enables schools to use budget surpluses for purposes of school improvement.

Personnel

90. The support is good. There are effective procedures to assist schools with sickness and capability issues and the recruitment of staff. The personnel service provides high quality advice which is appreciated by the schools, nearly all of which purchase the service, although they are sometimes concerned that advice is delayed.

91. There is, however, no computerised personnel information system as yet. This reduces the efficiency with which the personnel staff can monitor personnel information. A new combined personnel and payroll system has now been purchased jointly with a consortium of local authorities. The system will be installed shortly.

School meals

92. The survey shows that schools judge the service to be better than satisfactory overall. For four years prior to 1997 the school meal service was delivered by an external supplier and the uptake of meals declined sharply. Stockport direct services has delivered the service since 1997, and after an initial further decline, uptake has now increased to its 1993 level. Client services provide regular monitoring of meal service delivery standards. During the year to July 2000, the contractor met the minimum specification and safety standards in 98 per cent of the visits.

Cleaning services

93. Stockport direct services currently provide this service to 35 schools. The other schools have various different contractual arrangements for the service. The education department provides a client service to schools and monitors standards regularly. In the last year, the minimum standards were met or exceeded on 71 per cent of the visits.

Grounds maintenance

94. The community services division provides grounds maintenance for about 80 per cent of schools. The survey showed wide variation in the quality of the service which has recently been subject to a Best Value Review. A number of changes have been made as a result to improve the service.

Recommendations

- Strengthen strategic planning and the evaluation of the effectiveness with which it is implemented by ensuring that the lower levels of planning reflect the strategy, and that its delivery is assessed against relevant and quantifiable measures of performance.
- Strengthen external collaboration by holding regular, high level meetings with the diocesan authorities.
- Improve management support for schools by:

- establishing more effective quality assurance procedures and offering more advice on external providers; and
- in collaboration with the council's finance and ICT division, ensure that timely and accurate financial information is provided for schools.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

95. The LEA's policy for SEN, together with its associated strategy and development plan, is good. They are of high quality, clear, and are the result of careful and widespread consultation over time from an already effective basis of good provision. The LEA's concept of inclusion is not defined just by location, but equally by the quality of provision secured. The effectiveness of the policy is in consequence judged as much by the individual progress and attainment recorded by pupils as by numbers of mainstream school places provided for pupils with SEN. Such change does not occur overnight nor does it occur evenly across all settings at the same time. It derives more from the slow, continuous action of the LEA's policy and intent upon training and thence upon attitude and practice.

96. The momentum towards inclusion has increased significantly over the last three years, in line with the Government's Programme for Action. The implementation of the strategy is monitored effectively. Overall, the current balance of specialist and mainstream provision is about the national average but an increasing number of new statements are located in mainstream settings and the proportion of non-statemented provision is increasing as the number of statements declines. The school visits and other discussions showed unanimity of approval for the content and planning of the policy as well as the pace of its implementation.

Statutory obligations

97. The LEA meets its statutory obligations securely. It identifies pupils' SEN at an early stage through work with parents and voluntary sector providers. This leads to effective support and assessment work with parents and children.

98. The LEA has clear, staged criteria related to the Code of Practice and these are communicated to schools well. The process of formal assessment has improved significantly over the last three years: the figure for those completed within 18 weeks moving from 25 per cent to just under 99 per cent in that period. Without exceptions the figure is much lower at 65 per cent, but still above the national average.

99. The quality of statements and individual education plans (IEPs) seen during the inspection was generally good and in some cases very good, providing an effective basis for supporting and monitoring pupil attainment and progress. There is evidence that over the last couple of years there has been much greater regularity in the updating of statements than was previously the case, but there are still a few instances of delay. The LEA properly discharges

its function of annual review in general, and in particular has effective arrangements for transition reviews at the key stages. There are effective arrangements through the education psychological service (EPS) to ensure that the progress of pupils in independent and/or non-maintained schools is monitored and reviewed.

Improvement and value for money

100. Support for school improvement and value for money are both good.

101. The schools rate the quality of the learning support service (LSS) highly. They have good reason. Most of learning support expenditure is on non-statemented SEN and is delivered, according to clear criteria, through a system called "Stage 3 Plus" which provides extra help for pupils who do not require statements but still have considerable needs. The progress of individual pupils allocated these additional resources is reviewed at least half-yearly by LSS, which from the start agrees challenging targets with the school, for pupils' progress and attainment to secure return to earlier stages of the Code of Practice.

102. Special Educational Needs co-ordinators are supported well. The role of special schools in promoting inclusion is funded to provide outreach arrangements between them and mainstream schools. These arrangements are good. The work of the EPS is justifiably well regarded. As well as its involvement in early years and work with parents of children with SEN, its provision of advice and guidance to teachers is good. Support for sensory impaired pupils is also good. The recently appointed SEN adviser is already exerting significant influence for improvement.

103. Meeting the needs of children with SEN has been and remains a major LEA priority. Stockport has the highest centrally retained expenditure per pupil on SEN of all metropolitan LEAs. Over the last three years, the LEA has done all it reasonably can to encourage higher delegation but has respected the expressed views of the primary schools in opposing it. In light of the implementation of the new Code of Practice and the further review of funding overall, the LEA officers intend to keep the potential for delegation at the forefront of consideration by schools and members.

104. The spending of this retained money, largely on Stage 3 Plus, is carefully and effectively controlled. The LEA has also reduced the number of placements outside the borough and, although centrally retained levels of expenditure are high, the overall expenditure on SEN is not. Moreover, the services provided are good. In all of the schools visited support for SEN was at least satisfactory and in over 60 per cent it was good. The provision made for both statemented and non-statemented SEN provides good value for money.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

105. The LEA has managed the supply of school places in both primary and secondary schools effectively. The school organisation committee has been established and agreed the second school organisation plan in July 2000. The plan provides a clear analysis of the issues.

106. In the primary sector there are currently around ten per cent surplus places, but nine primary schools have more than a 25 per cent surplus. Only one primary school has less than 100 pupils. There have been reorganisations in recent years to remove surplus places. The number of primary pupils is continuing to decline, particularly in some areas of the borough. As a result, if no further action were taken, surplus places in the primary sector would increase to 17 per cent by 2005. The education committee agreed a programme of area reviews at its meeting in March 2001 with a timetable for reporting and decision.

107. The LEA has largely completed the implementation of the Class Sizes Plan. Around 4,500 infant pupils were in classes of more than 30 in January 1998, but in September 2000 there were infant classes of that size in only two schools. The plan is expected to be fully implemented by September 2001.

108. The LEA has managed the supply of places in the secondary sector effectively. There were 7.7 per cent surplus places in the secondary sector in January 2000. No secondary schools had more than 25 per cent surplus places and no school had less than 750 pupils on its roll. None of the secondary schools is yet affected by a falling roll and recently the secondary age population has been increasing. Extra capacity has had to be provided in a number of secondary schools, including schools in the Roman Catholic sector.

Admissions

109. Admissions to primary schools are administered by individual schools. They follow agreed criteria and the first applications to be considered are those from parents living in the school's priority area. The process works effectively.

110. The LEA administers admissions well for all secondary schools, including voluntary aided ones, on behalf of their governing bodies. The system, which involves priority areas works effectively and 96.8 per cent of parents received their first choice in 2000. The LEA has established an admissions forum which has considered proposals on local consultations about admissions, revisions of priority areas in some parts of the borough and agreeing on common dates for admissions. It has also agreed a procedure between schools for transfer of

pupils being reintegrated after exclusion to avoid them all going to the same school.

111. There were 28 admission appeals in the primary sector in 2000. A fifth of them were successful. The number of secondary appeals has declined over the last two years but the overall increase between 1990 and 2000 was from 41 appeals to 180. The appeals process is scheduled to be completed for both primary and secondary schools at a reasonably early date this year. The process is completed in time for secondary induction days.

Asset management planning

112. The asset management planning process is progressing satisfactorily overall and has significantly improved the quality of building information available to schools. However, there are weaknesses in the quality of surveys, the management of capital projects and in the maintenance service making repairs to school buildings.

113. The condition surveys were carried out initially by a private firm of surveyors. The DfES was critical of the quality of the surveys and, as a result, a number of properties were re-surveyed. The new surveys have been approved by the DfES.

114. The local policy statement provides a sound basis for establishing priorities. Schools are consulted on capital priorities and have been provided with information about the condition of their buildings. That information will be revised for the schools being surveyed again.

115. The authority has operated a planned preventive maintenance programme since 1974. That, and investment in recent years through the New Deal for Schools, has improved the condition of school building but there is still a backlog of repairs. The condition survey shows the need for £6.78 millions of urgent work, £22.48 millions of essential work over the next two years and a further £24.89 millions of work of lower priority. The anticipated £11.760 millions of capital budget over the next three years will not be enough to do the work in even the top two priorities. There has also been slippage in capital projects and as a result significant amounts of capital spending have slipped between financial years. More staff have been assigned to the work and this has reduced the amount of money not spent.

116. The education department offers a structural repairs and maintenance service with technical work provided by another department. A day-to-day repairs contract was awarded to Stockport direct services. In 2000/01, 99 per cent of primary schools and all special schools bought the service but none of the secondary schools did so. The school survey shows that over half of primary

schools consider that the service is at least satisfactory but the schools visited varied in their assessment of the quality of the service.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

117. The provision of education otherwise than at school is a very high priority for the LEA. A wide range of high quality provision meets the various, specific needs of young people who are without a school place.

118. There is a clear strategy to support pupils out of school with provision that matches their educational, social and health needs with a view to reintegration into mainstream education, placement in specialist provision or planned transition to further education or work. Pupils are referred to a panel which decides on the best placement for them.

119. There are three PRU, each with a highly specific focus. One supports pupils with behaviour difficulties with a view to preventing exclusion, the second provides for schoolgirls who are pregnant or mothers and the third provides for pupils with emotional difficulties. The last unit also provides the home and hospital teaching service. Additionally, there are two services to provide for pupils permanently excluded from school. One of these deals with pupils in Year 10 and younger, the other with pupils in Year 11. There is a good record of pupils being entered for, and being successful in, externally accredited examinations.

120. There is a high level of good quality provision. Of the 160 pupils currently in the PRUs, 152 are involved in planned educational activity placements for 18 hours or more per week. Of the remaining eight, five are new referrals and three have complex needs that limit their ability to undertake education at the present time. Plans and funding are in place to ensure 100 per cent provision by 2002. There is also an effective scheme to reintegrate excluded pupils in mainstream schools.

121. Provision for children out of school because of illness is good. Pupils educated at home are monitored and their parents get good advice from the education welfare service (EWS) about their duties

Attendance

122. Attendance is a little above the national average in primary and secondary schools and is rising. Unauthorised absence is in line with the national average. Overall, the LEA's support for attendance is satisfactory and improving.

123. The LEA has a clear and detailed strategy for reducing unauthorised absence detailed in the behaviour and support plan (BSP) and the EDP. The strategy has been implemented effectively in the schools. This has helped them

to improve their own policies and procedures to reduce absence, and has been increasingly effective in pursuing truants through formal warning letters and prosecutions. The monitoring of attendance by the EWS is thorough. The work of the service has been increasingly deployed to the schools with the greatest absence problems and the LEA plans, in line with lessons learned from Government pilot studies, to allocate time more precisely, using detailed information on small pockets of social deprivation.

124. The EWS is managed well. It has responded to the recommendations of a recent external audit report by helping schools to reduce the number of pupils taking holidays in term time, by improving the recording of attendance, and by specifying performance measures for the service itself. Most of the schools visited received good EWS support but staff absence from the service last year temporarily reduced its effectiveness and absence increased in the school affected by this. The EWS has set up some projects to deal with specific problems. These have raised attendance but have not been consistently embedded in schools' routines.

Behaviour support

125. Overall, behaviour support is satisfactory. The relatively high rate of exclusions in primary schools has been addressed by recent changes in arrangements for support which are working well. New arrangements for in-school support in secondary are also beginning to have a positive impact. There are, however, gaps in support for pupils in Key Stage 3.

126. Support for behaviour and pupil management is judged good in OFSTED school inspections. The number of fixed term exclusions appeared to rise dramatically in 1999/2000 but this was the effect of improved recording system. Previously, schools did not record many fixed term exclusions. Permanent exclusions have remained constant over the last two years having declined from previously higher levels.

127. The BSP is good and its targets for attendance and exclusions are ambitious but achievable. The LEA is, at present, consulting schools on a revised plan formulated in the light of the Pupil Retention Grant. The new plan has the approval of the headteachers interviewed during the inspection.

128. Primary schools get help from the newly formed primary behaviour support service which is based at a special school for primary pupils with emotional and behaviour difficulties. Outreach teachers are having a positive effect on improving behaviour and their work is valued by primary schools. By contrast, in Key Stage 3 there are problems with early identification and assessment of pupils and the referral process and provision for pupils with extreme behaviour difficulties or psychiatric problems. However, the service has sound objectives relating to support for pupils, assisting staff in managing pupil

behaviour and helping schools to develop behaviour policies. Four outreach teachers work with schools. The service is small because 12 schools have chosen to spend the Pupil Retention Grant on in-school facilities with additional advice provided by the behaviour support services.

129. Useful guidance has been provided for schools on developing behaviour and discipline policies and on preventing bullying.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

130. There is good provision for health, safety, welfare and child protection.

131. The LEA has successfully promoted health awareness through training and support programmes for teachers and specific education programmes for pupils. Additionally, 85 schools are involved in the well-constructed, local healthy schools scheme. The LEA is rigorous in its approach to promoting safe working practices and environments on council property and on school visits. It also responds promptly to requests for help.

132. There are secure procedures and good practices for monitoring and protecting the welfare of young people. The EWS tracks pupils taken off school rolls to ensure they are enrolled at another school. Licenses are issued for the employment of children; advice is provided for employers and work places are checked for compliance.

133. The LEA carries out its duties on child protection well. A senior officer has responsibility for the work and chairs the multi-agency child protection committee. The EWS has responsibility for training and implementing procedures in the education department. There is a trained, designated person in all schools and the LEA keeps an up-to-date register those teachers. Training materials for staff and a draft policy for schools are being prepared.

Young people in public care

134. The council has taken a strong lead in developing high quality services for young people in public care in line with its commitment to support vulnerable people. The social services and education departments have worked closely to develop a well-constructed strategy to support the young people concerned. The social services committee takes the council's role of corporate parent very seriously. It receives regular reports about provision and scrutinises data on attendance, performance and exclusions. There are plans to celebrate the success of young people in care in the near future.

135. The Quality Protects management action plan outlines clearly how the children will be helped to get the maximum benefit from school. All the schools visited had taken part in training and were confident about implementing

procedures. Social workers have good working relationships with schools but occasionally there are difficulties in communications at critical times. The schools report good study support for young people from social workers in residential homes. Carers have been well supported through a help-line and guidance on supporting young people. Realistic targets for young people have been set for attainment, attendance and exclusion. Statistics show that pupils in public care in the borough have attained higher than elsewhere. This positive picture is reflected in the views of schools surveyed who judged the service satisfactory or better.

Minority ethnic children

136. The LEA provides good support for the small percentage of minority ethnic pupils and sound support for Travellers' children when they are enrolled in Stockport schools. However, the LEA does not use attainment data effectively. There are small numbers of minority ethnic pupils from diverse groups in many schools and larger numbers, mainly of Black African, Indian and Pakistani pupils, in a few schools. Support is provided through the English as an additional language (EAL) Service.

137. The Ethnic Minority and Travellers Achievement Grant is held centrally by the LEA and is used to fund an effective team of specialist teachers and bilingual assistants, interpreting services and to support the work of volunteers. The specialist EAL teachers have a good knowledge of the schools and the children and the bilingual assistants assist children well in their home language as well as teaching English. Volunteers have been used well as interpreters and to support parents and their children. Pupils make very good progress in learning English. The EAL team is well informed about, and has made a good contribution to training in literacy, numeracy and early years.

138. The Cheshire Travellers' education service provides sound support for Travellers' children when it is needed. Last year 17 school-aged Traveller children were enrolled at some time. The LEA aims to secure a school place within a minimum of three days and a maximum of seven.

139. The LEA has yet to collect and analyse pupils' attainment and attendance by ethnicity. Until last year information about the ethnicity of pupils was not collected, so there was no overview. There is an intention to establish a central database to provide the analysis in September, when unique pupil numbers are introduced. However, some schools have been slow to provide the necessary data that will allow the LEA to set targets for attainment and attendance. Advisers have taken on the role of monitoring the attainment of minority ethnic pupils in individual schools and have found that minority ethnic pupils tend to be high attaining apart from Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi pupils. In schools visited during the inspection ethnic minority pupils were attaining well. No pupils from ethnic minority groups have been excluded from schools.

Gifted and talented pupils

140. School inspections and examination results show a larger incidence of above average attainment in Stockport's schools than is the case nationally and the LEA has, for a long time, sought to help schools provide challenging education for able pupils, especially at primary level. This has very recently been crystallised in a written policy for gifted and talented pupils which is now available for schools. The policy is clear and concise, gives a wide range of advice to schools on developing their own policies, teaching, means of identifying such pupils, and on enriching some subjects especially literacy and numeracy. An LEA action plan for able pupils outlines a comprehensive range of practical tasks designed to help schools better to challenge able pupils. The advisory service has appropriate expertise in this field, well used to develop its policy and action plan. Schools have started to incorporate intentions for gifted and talented pupils into their planning and to identify able pupils. Staff in some schools, including those with few able pupils, have, with LEA assistance, done much to provide for individually able pupils and to raise staff awareness. This had reportedly been assisted by liaison between schools, the LEA staff, and the National Association for Gifted Children which is based in Stockport and benefits from LEA financial support. Further LEA support is provided through a strong music service which incorporates the well regarded Stockport Youth Orchestra. Overall, the LEA is making substantial efforts to help schools to provide for gifted and talented pupils. It has the vision and staff capability to build on this further.

Social exclusion

141. The LEA is making good progress recently in promoting social inclusion. There is some outstanding practice but there remain areas of significant weakness. Resources are well aligned to priorities that support inclusion. Children educated otherwise than at school are exceptionally well supported as are those in public care. Planning and provision for young children in the early years are well advanced. There are good strategies to ensure pupils with SEN are included in mainstream schools with suitable support where it is necessary. Overall, support for pupils from ethnic minority groups is good but there is a weakness in target-setting.

142. At a corporate level, the council has been slow to combat racism. It has justified this because of the low population of minority ethnic groups and has had no system for reporting and monitoring racial incidents. Recently the council has accelerated its efforts. It has made a commitment to the Commission for Racial Equality's standard for local government and has committed itself to act on the recommendations of the Macpherson inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Although there is little evidence of racism in Stockport schools, there are reports of racism in parts of the community. One secondary school reported serious incidents of racism on the nearby housing estate.

Recommendations

- Proceed with the area reviews of primary school places and with the reduction of the surplus.
- Improve the quality of building works carried out under the repairs contract.
- Improve support for attendance by:
 - providing effective cover to schools for education welfare officers on sick leave; and
 - ensuring that the service establishes those aspects of special projects which have been linked to increases in pupil attendance in its normal routines.
- Improve the assessment and support of pupils in Key Stage 3 with severe behaviour difficulties or psychiatric problems.
- Improve support for ethnic minority pupils by collecting and analysing data on ethnicity, attainment, progress, attendance and exclusions and ensuring that schools set realistic and demanding targets.
- Improve the work to promote social inclusion by implementing the plans to improve racial harmony.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to develop the LEA strategy for school improvement

- Improve education development planning by strengthening the link between the strengths and weaknesses evident in the schools and the proposed activities, and by making more effective use of quantifiable success criteria to measure progress in implementing the plan.
- Improve the challenge to, and support for, secondary schools in order to raise attainment in the GCSE.

Recommendations to make school improvement more effective

- Improve the use of performance data by persuading primary headteachers to share benchmarking information as secondary headteachers do.
- Improve target-setting, and the underlying performance data, for pupils from ethnic minority groups so that schools make sufficient use of both in their planning.
- Develop the electronic transfer of information to enable an earlier distribution of the data to schools.
- Improve support for ICT in the curriculum by:
 - developing effective moderation procedures for teachers' assessment of pupils' ICT capability, especially at Key Stage 3; and
 - ensuring that all primary schools understand their own level of ICT competence, the curricular support available from the LEA, and are adequately informed to be able to buy – from the LEA or elsewhere – the support most fitted to their needs.
- Improve support for the management use of ICT by:
 - selecting data management software to meet future data needs effectively;
 - developing reliable electronic communication with schools, ensuring all schools have the equipment and capacity for this; and
 - working with schools to establish how the currently fragmented technical support can more effectively meet their needs.
- Improve governors' monitoring of their schools by providing them with notes of advisors' visits.

Recommendations to improve strategic management

- Strengthen strategic planning and the evaluation of the effectiveness with which it is implemented by ensuring that the lower levels of planning reflect the strategy, and that its delivery is assessed against relevant and quantifiable measures of performance.
- Strengthen external collaboration by holding regular, high level meetings with the diocesan authorities.
- Improve management support for schools by:
 - establishing more effective quality assurance procedures and offering more advice on external providers; and
 - in collaboration with the council's finance and ICT division, ensure that timely and accurate financial information is provided for schools.

Recommendations to improve access to education

- Proceed with the area reviews of primary school places and with the reduction of the surplus.
- Improve the quality of building works carried out under the repairs contract.
- Improve support for attendance by:
 - providing effective cover to schools for education welfare officers on sick leave; and
 - ensuring that the service establishes those aspects of special projects which have been linked to increases in pupil attendance in its normal routines.
- Improve the assessment and support of pupils in Key Stage 3 with severe behaviour difficulties or psychiatric problems.
- Improve support for ethnic minority pupils by collecting and analysing data on ethnicity, attainment, progress, attendance and exclusions and ensuring that schools set realistic and demanding targets.
- Improve the work to promote social inclusion by implementing the plans to improve racial harmony.

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