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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, in so far 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 discussions with LEA members, staff in the education department and in 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 82 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 11 primary, five secondary and two special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support, which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. Evidence from other HMI visits to schools in the LEA was also considered.

COMMENTARY

4. Shropshire is England's smallest shire county in terms of population. Most of its people live in market towns, but are otherwise spread evenly throughout its pleasant, rural environment. Rates of unemployment and the numbers of pupils from ethnic minorities and eligible for free school meals are all low. In local government re-organisation in April 1998, Telford and Wrekin became a separate unitary authority. In order to minimise disruption to schools, many key services have continued to serve both authorities: this has worked well.

5. Shropshire's schools and pupils perform well. None of its 168 schools have been found by OFSTED inspections to fall into any formal category of concern: this is an excellent record and one which reflects the quality of challenge and support which have been provided to schools by the LEA. Its pupils perform consistently above national standards at all ages and are, in the main, improving their performance in line with the national trend.

6. The LEA's strengths far outweigh its few weaknesses. The council has a modern structure, clear focus and provides good leadership through its members and officers, delivering very good value for money. With one exception, it performs all school improvement functions well, and in some areas with excellence. The leadership, planning, management, expertise and effectiveness of services, which directly support school improvement, are all good. Overall, its direct services for pupils are also performed satisfactorily. However, there are weaknesses relating to the implementation of Best Value and strategies for information and communication technology (ICT). The provision of education for pupils who have no school place is poor and measures to combat racism have been implemented too slowly.

7. The following functions are performed very well:

- support to schools for the use of performance data;
- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support for schools causing concern;
- support for school management;
- support for property services;
- the education of pupils with special educational needs; and
- planning school places and pupil admissions.

8. The following functions are performed unsatisfactorily:

- reviewing the Best Value of services;
- ICT support for pupils and schools; and
- provision for pupils with no school place.

9. This is a good LEA with the potential to improve further. It has a senior management team of high quality which has the capacity to tackle the specific areas of identified weaknesses. It should do so with confidence in its own ability and the strengths of its schools and pupils.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

10. Shropshire is England's smallest shire county council in population (280,000) but covers a large and diverse geographic area. Shrewsbury and the other market towns account for 65 per cent of the population, the remainder are widely and sparsely distributed in what is one of the most agriculturally dependent counties in England. Three per cent of the population is unemployed and 11 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals: both are below national averages.

11. There are 122 primary, ten junior and 12 infant schools serving 21,355 pupils; 22 secondary schools serving 17,659 pupils and two special schools serving 203 pupils: the proportion of voluntary aided schools is low although 60 primary schools are voluntary controlled; four schools were formerly grant-maintained and now have foundation status. There are 26 schools with designated nursery classes and eight secondary schools with sixth forms. Half the primary schools have fewer than 100 pupils and four secondary schools have less than 500 pupils. An Education Action Zone including 21 schools and a tertiary college was established in April 2000. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities or with English as a second language is very low; the proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) is high at four per cent; 202 children in public care attend Shropshire schools.

Performance

12. The LEA's baseline data indicate that pupils enter primary school attaining levels rather below the national average.

13. At the end of Key Stage 1, the proportions of pupils achieving Level 2 and above in the national reading and writing tests are well above the national averages. The rate of improvement in reading is broadly in line with the national trend, while that in writing is above the rate found nationally. In the mathematics tests, the proportion attaining Level 2 and above is well above the national average, and the rate of improvement is broadly in line with the national trend.

14. At the end of Key Stage 2, the proportions of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in the English, mathematics and science tests are above the national averages. The rate of improvement in all three subjects is broadly in line with the national trend.

15. At the end of Key Stage 3, the proportions of pupils achieving Level 5 and above in the English, mathematics and science tests are above the national averages. The rate of improvement in English is above the national trend while the rate in mathematics is below and that in science is broadly in line with the trend found nationally.

16. GCSE results are above the national averages, with 57 per cent gaining five or more A* to C grades. Although the rate of improvement in the percentage of

pupils achieving one or more A* to G grades is below the national trend, the rates for five or more A* to C grades and the average points score are in line with it.

17. In primary and secondary schools the rates of attendance are above, and the permanent exclusion rates are below, the national figures.

18. OFSTED inspection evidence shows that the proportion of primary schools judged to be good or very good is above the national average and the proportion of secondary schools placed in this category is well above that found nationally. Currently, there are no schools that have been found by OFSTED to require special measures or to have serious weaknesses.

Funding

19. Shropshire's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for education is in the bottom 25 per cent nationally. For the last three years spending on education has been above SSA by up to two per cent.

(unless stated, averages are compared to upper tier/county authorities)

20. The following table shows the planned expenditure against SSA across the council for the financial year 2000/01:

Education	Social Services	Highways	Capital	'Other'	
%SSA	100.6	103.6	75.9	124.1	147.5

21. The council plans to spend over £9 million more than SSA overall, £654,000 (plus some capital) of which is on education.

22. Spending on non statutory provision such as adult education and nursery is lower than average and the Local Schools Budget (LSB) is £2632 per pupil, compared to £2692 on average.

23. Under the Fair Funding regulations, the following amounts are retained from the LSB to carry out statutory functions:

Category	Shropshire (£/pupil)	Average (£/pupil)
Admin/Management	76	72
Special Needs	115	154
School Improvement	22	20
Access	188	148
Retained Standards Fund	31	38

24. The proportion of funds held centrally by the LEA is average. Lower than average spending on SEN results from lower expenditure on non-mainstream items such as out of school provision. The spend on access is £40 more than average owing to high transport costs: the third highest in England. The percentage of the

LSB delegated in Shropshire is close to but slightly lower than average at 83.5 per cent compared to 84.0 per cent.

25. Shropshire has met the Government's targets for passing on new funds, increasing delegation and controlling central spending. However, the net effect of all the factors shown above is that the average Individual Schools Budget (ISB), that is the money per pupil delegated to schools, is £2197, 125th lowest out of 150 LEAs. Considering the high performance of pupils, Shropshire LEA and its schools deliver very good value for money.

26. Capital expenditure has increased steadily over time, in a planned way, from £4.9 million in 1998/99 to £7.9 million in the current year. Although an Education Action Zone (EAZ) and Sure Start scheme have been established, most categories of grant related funds are not accessible to Shropshire and the income from such sources is modest.

Council structure

27. The council has no overall political majority. The Conservatives hold 21 seats, Liberal Democrats 11, Labour six and the minority parties six.

28. The modernised council structure was established in September 1999. The schools cabinet committee has the most significant impact on education decision-making, much of which is scrutinised by the education services scrutiny panel. There are also five county area panels. The chairman of the schools cabinet committee is a standing member of the council's cabinet.

29. The schools cabinet committee has eleven political members (five Conservative, three Liberal Democrat, three others) and eleven non-elected members, four of whom have voting powers. The scrutiny panel has nine members, two from each of the main national political groups, one independent and two parent governors, none of whom are on the cabinet committee.

30. The cabinet and shadow cabinet meet monthly, and are advised by the chief executive and the management board, which includes the director of education.

31. Education is one of four corporate directorates: it has a senior management structure of corporate director and four assistant directors, one of whom, unusually, manages both school improvement and children's services. The logic of the contribution of children's services to school improvement is sound, but the weight and span of responsibilities within the structure is unevenly distributed.

The Education Development Plan

32. The Education Development Plan (EDP) provides a good framework for school improvement across the county, reflecting both local and national priorities. A very detailed audit and analysis of performance supports each of the eight priorities. Coherence is achieved by a systematic mapping at the end of each activity plan of the three key areas of standards, quality of teaching and leadership and

management, together with the national priorities. The relevance of the EDP priorities for schools is good.

33. The eight priorities are:

- to improve the standards of attainment in literacy at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3;
- to improve the standards of attainment in numeracy at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3;
- to improve the quality of early years provision in all sectors;
- to increase the opportunities for the promotion of creativity and independent learning as a means of enhancing motivation and self-esteem;
- to improve standards achieved by the end of Key Stage 4 in all subjects;
- to increase inclusive education through positive behaviour management, reducing exclusions and improving provision for those excluded;
- to enhance the quality of school leadership and management by improving and extending the range of support for senior and middle managers and governors; and
- to improve the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) in schools in order to enhance learning opportunities and raise achievement.

34. The activity plans are generally good. Each plan begins with a clear identification of the weaknesses, the exception being the priority for early years which is based on an LEA policy commitment to pre-school learning within a rural context rather than on identified weaknesses in this area. A number of activities are differentiated to meet the needs of specific groups such as the underachievement of boys in literacy but there is little reference to the gifted and more able or to the achievement of the small numbers of pupils from minority ethnic groups. Overall, the cost of the EDP is close to the average for county authorities.

35. The targets for Key Stage 2, when originally set, appeared challenging. However, for the past two years, the LEA has outperformed its targets for English and mathematics. In summer 2000, the English target was exceeded by almost three percentage points, and the mathematics target by almost five percentage points, thereby also exceeding the target for 2001. Despite the progress in mathematics, the LEA has not increased its target for 2001. The original 2000 target for the percentage of five or more passes at A*-C grades was very modest in relation to performance in the previous two years, being less than half a percentage point above the 1998 figure. Actual performance in summer 2000 was three per cent above the 2000 target, and two per cent above the 2001 target. Given the focus within priority five on raising attainment in all subjects at Key Stage 4, these targets are not sufficiently challenging.

36. The process for monitoring and evaluation is very comprehensive and clearly set out. There is a well-defined structure for the monitoring and oversight of progress on the plan. Each priority is overseen by designated advisers who are responsible for the production of termly monitoring reports to the headteacher planning and monitoring group (HPMG). Progress reports are thorough but there has been limited opportunity to date for the council to consider the impact of the EDP on school improvement. Consultative groups of headteachers have been involved in the annual review of the EDP and updated plans have been published. Overall, progress on the

first year of the EDP has been good with the exception of the priorities on ICT and social inclusion.

37. In schools there is a high level of awareness of the priorities in the EDP. Most schools, particularly primary schools, find them relevant to their needs. The link between the EDP and school development plans (SDP) was judged to be good in just over half of the schools and satisfactory in the remainder. LEA guidance on school development planning is very good and schools are expected to reflect the EDP priorities within their own development plans. In practice, this was a strong feature of the SDPs and the involvement of the attached adviser in reviewing these plans enabled a further close linkage between the EDP and schools' development needs.

The allocation of resources to priorities

38. The division of resources between council departments has been based on historic allocations rather than declared priorities, although there is improvement in planning for 2001/02. In the education department, resources are closely aligned to priorities except in the field of special educational needs (SEN).

39. Concerns about Shropshire's comparative SSA position have deflected attention away from thoroughly examining the distribution of resources between council departments. Whilst most headteachers interviewed believed in the council's stated commitment to education as a priority, few had knowledge for example, that other departments were spending significantly more than SSA (up to almost 50 per cent more in one case), or opportunities to debate such issues. Education has been included in next year's corporate plan as a priority and at first sight this appears to bring with it significant extra resource. After central government increases however, the allocation of a further £500,000 simply restores cuts made to the 1999/00 budget. There is no stated commitment to improving schools' funding positions compared to other LEAs.

40. The council's approach to setting a balanced revenue budget over recent years has been reactive and complex to a degree which has prevented stakeholders forming an accurate assessment of the position. Unrealistic savings are followed by apparent overspends. Schools are owed £1.8 million of their balances, which have been used, with their agreement, to provide the LEA's contribution to Standards Fund allocations, but for which there is no planned repayment, as recommended by the District Auditor (DA). Headteachers frequently claimed that the LEA regularly presented worst case scenarios only to soften them by finding additional resources at the eleventh hour. Consequently, the culture and practice of medium term budget planning by schools are underdeveloped.

41. At school level, the distribution mechanism is sound. It is based on well considered principles, regularly reviewed and fully consulted upon with schools, by officers who understand the issues. It has a 'needs led' element based on the numbers of teachers required, this being a pragmatic solution to maintaining the large number of small schools. Whilst larger schools sometimes take issue with the effects this has on their resources, their main concern is over the amount of resource

they have. Officers are planning a major review of the formula, which will involve schools, to give a better fit to current and future demands.

42. Significant improvements in budget planning are becoming apparent. The latest corporate plan signals a move away from an incremental approach to one linked to priorities and meeting service objectives. The director of finance and other chief officers are helping quickly to establish this approach. Schools report a significant improvement in the transparency of recent budget consultations. However, the LEA accurately describes the forthcoming budgetary position as 'tightly drawn'; it is also fragile and vulnerable to any unforeseen pressures.

Best Value (BV)

43. Practical arrangements are in place to enable the council to approach the completion of Best Value reviews satisfactorily in future, and some reviews of significant scale, such as transport, have been completed. Lessons have been learned and, with the help of District Audit, necessary improvements, as apparent in the ICT in administration BV review, are being made.

44. There are shortcomings of a fundamental nature. Elected member involvement in reviews is patchy and they neither understand nor fully execute their scrutiny function. In schools understanding was very poor, and no evidence could be found of governors being required to report to the LEA on how they sought to apply BV principles to their schools.

45. On a more positive note, there are now arrangements in place to match service planning to corporate and BV objectives and these are also to be linked to the emergent appraisal scheme to form a robust performance management system, although it is too early to report any outcomes.

Recommendations

In order to improve budget planning:

- agree clear and ambitious performance targets and make them central to decisions about resource distribution; and
- give stakeholders more opportunity to understand and influence the generation and distribution of resources to effect agreed performance outcomes.

In order to gain maximum benefit from the Best Value approach:

- raise stakeholders' understanding of BV principles;
- ensure that elected members take the lead in carrying out their reviewing and scrutiny responsibilities;
- provide guidance to schools on their approach to BV principles. Require and monitor responses in line with government guidance.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

46. The quality of the advisory service and the exercise of the key functions of monitoring, challenging, supporting and, if necessary, intervening in schools are major strengths of the LEA. A high degree of trust and respect has been established between schools and advisers. Although the Code of Practice on LEA-school Relations has not been formally discussed between the LEA and schools, evidence from school visits indicates that there is a clear understanding amongst headteachers that the LEA is committed to promoting school self-autonomy and to developing each school's capacity for improvement.

47. The LEA has well established systems for monitoring the performance of schools based on the extensive use of performance data. All schools are allocated a maximum of three adviser visits per year. In practice, however, there is considerable differentiation of support according to the needs of the school. For example, in the current financial year, 38 schools (22.6 per cent) received the equivalent of a half a day of adviser time and only four schools (2.4 per cent) received the maximum of three days. The majority of schools (45.2 per cent) received the equivalent of one day's visit from the attached adviser. The level of LEA monitoring and support was judged to be proportionate to the needs of the school in three-quarters of the schools visited.

48. The majority of headteachers accept the need for these differing levels of support. They also recognise the recent shift in the attached adviser's role away from an over-emphasis on monitoring in all schools, to the adviser playing more of a validating role in relation to the school's own self-review processes. In the last year, the responsibility for monitoring the quality of teaching in schools has rightly shifted from the advisory service to schools themselves: all schools visited, even the smallest, had comprehensive systems in place for this purpose. All other advisory visits, unless the school is a cause for concern, are purchased by the school apart from the entitlements to literacy and numeracy support in primary schools.

49. All schools receive an annual review and target setting visit in the autumn term. Advisers know their schools well and provide appropriate challenge and support. Their function of challenging schools is widely recognised and in most cases accepted. This extends to their review of progress on school development plans, where the LEA has provided detailed and comprehensive guidance to schools.

50. The advisory service provides very good leadership for the LEA's strategy for school improvement. Management of the service, which incorporates children's services, is of a very high quality. Service planning is detailed and clearly focused on corporate priorities and education directorate targets. The identification of service priorities is thorough and the related planning is good. The team of advisers includes a very good range of experience and expertise which is highly valued by schools. There are appropriate arrangements for the induction of new advisers. Professional development is closely aligned to priorities within the service plan and the EDP. In particular, advisers appreciate the training in the use of performance data and target

setting provided by the performance review and research unit (PRRU). Line management arrangements by the senior advisers are appropriate and facilitate an ongoing review of work in progress.

51. There is a high level of buy-back by schools of the advisory services. Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin councils have a joint agreement whereby the advisory service is provided by Shropshire and is shared by the two LEAs. Its customer base is large (254 schools across the two LEAs) and the service is able to sustain a strong curriculum base over and above the attached adviser work. Just over 85 per cent of schools purchase the subscription scheme, while the remaining 15 per cent are buying various levels of consultancy, training and resources provided by the service. External clients include post-16 providers, independent schools, other LEAs, the DfEE and private sector organisations. The service has been extremely successful at income generation; 38 per cent of its total costs in 2000/2001. This in turn has enabled the two LEAs to provide a comprehensive and highly experienced service at an average cost for local schools. In light of the quality and effectiveness of the service and the overall costs, the service provides good value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

52. Support for the collection and analysis of performance data is excellent and the LEA approach to target-setting is good. The LEA has a well-deserved national reputation in this field and a long history of developing pupil performance data and its effective use in the targeting of under-performance. The outcomes of data analysis have been used effectively to influence strategies within the EDP and to shape in-service training, particularly in the literacy and numeracy programmes. Schools have long been committed to the effective exchange and use of data and a strong partnership has been established between the LEA and schools.

53. The LEA's PRRU provides schools with a very comprehensive and sophisticated range of data. It includes detailed analyses from baseline through all the key stages to 'A' level, demonstrating the impact of a wide range of factors such as prior attainment, gender, age, SEN and the percentage of free school meals. Primary schools are organised into 'families' of schools and particularly valued the twice-yearly meetings which enable them to compare and challenge their performance with similar schools. Managers of schools are increasingly skilful and confident in handling data and have the capacity to review and analyse attainment and monitor individual pupils' progress against targets.

54. The autumn monitoring visit to the school by the attached adviser focuses on agreeing targets and identifying strategies for achieving them. Central to this process is the use of an *aide memoire*, which includes a clear summary of three-year performance information. The target-setting process includes four strands; trends over time, benchmark data, and predictions based on prior attainment information, together with individual pupil information provided by the school. Discussions with the attached adviser are clearly focused, rigorous and in most cases, challenging. Failure to agree targets which are acceptable in relation to the prior attainment predictions result in further negotiation involving senior officers. In general, there is a very good understanding of how the LEA and school target-setting processes mesh together. In two schools visited however, there were examples of low expectations,

which were not being sufficiently challenged by the LEA; and in a third school, target setting lacked appropriate involvement by the governing body.

55. The leadership and quality of support provided for assessment and the PRRU are very good. Schools particularly value the bespoke data analysis and quality of training which is offered by the unit through its school effectiveness centre. In 2000/01, the unit has rightly prioritised training and development on target setting for minority ethnic pupils and individual pupil target-setting in special schools; both of which are in the early stages of development.

Support for literacy

56. The LEA's support for raising standards of literacy is very good and highly valued by schools in all phases.

57. At the end of Key Stage 2, results in the National Curriculum tests in English are consistently above the national average and in line with the average for LEAs with similar socio-economic circumstances. In 2000, 79 per cent of pupils attained level 4 or higher. This is three percentage points above the LEA's target and places it well on course to achieve or exceed its 2002 target of 84 per cent. The results at Key Stage 1 are well above the national averages and above the averages for the LEA's statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 3, the pupils in Shropshire schools perform above the national average and in line with the standards in similar LEAs.

58. The well-balanced and effective literacy team is very well managed and receives good support from other members of the advisory service. A network of trained volunteer reading helpers has also been established. The LEA has been working to improve standards of literacy since 1994 through its RAISE (Raising Achievement in Shropshire Education) project and has built on this work through its strong commitment to the National Literacy Strategy. The EDP priority has appropriate activities and good updated action plans. The support is allocated according to a clear analysis of need and members of staff are well deployed to priorities. Very effective support materials have been produced and are used in some other LEAs as well as in Shropshire schools. Productive links, which are particularly helpful for small rural schools, have been established with the numeracy strategy.

59. The quality of training is high. While the training and support provided are appropriately differentiated according to need, all schools have received a significant amount of training, on a rolling programme, with beneficial effects. Schools also appreciate the in-house work of consultants and advisers and the support provided by the literacy team to school development groups (SDGs). The LEA's effective systems of data collection and analysis are used well to support target-setting and to identify where to increase the levels of challenge or support. Those schools that fall below their targets or are deemed to be coasting have been identified and given increased support.

60. The current priorities have been sensibly identified as improving attainment in writing, improving boys' performance, and developing more active teaching and learning approaches within the literacy hour. The literacy team is swift to react to

identified needs and keeps schools up-to-date with current issues through courses, newsletters and termly meetings for literacy co-ordinators. Planning has been identified as a weakness in some non-intensive schools and a core of expert teachers is therefore producing exemplar materials to help teachers. Similarly, writing within other subjects has been targeted as an area for development and training is being made available to all schools.

61. The secondary schools were briefed at the very beginning of the strategy and at a special conference in the summer of 2000. Summer schools, evaluated by advisers, have been held for the past three years and there has been some targeted literacy work in selected secondary schools. Evidence from visits to schools during this inspection suggests that, while there is scope for further work in the secondary phase, the effects of the strategy can be seen in the improving literacy skills of Year 7 pupils. The LEA has been concerned with the specific needs of small schools since before the strategy began and it has established a small schools support network. The literacy team has close and effective links with the EAZ and with other support services, including those for ethnic minorities and pupils with special educational needs.

Support for numeracy

62. The support for raising the standards of numeracy is good, and appreciated by schools.

63. In the 2000 National Curriculum mathematics tests, 77 per cent of Key Stage 2 pupils achieved level 4 or higher. This exceeded the LEA's target by four percentage points, was above the national average and broadly matched the average for the LEA's statistical neighbours. The 2002 target of 80 per cent is well within reach. Mathematics results at Key Stage 1 are in line with those for statistical neighbours and well above national figures. At Key Stage 3, the performance of pupils in Shropshire schools is above the national average and in line with standards in similar LEAs.

64. The numeracy team is well led and effective. It has productive links with the literacy strategy, with other members of the advisory service, and with the EAZ. Fifteen leading mathematics teachers have been appointed and work effectively to a balanced programme. The numeracy centre has good course facilities and an extensive range of resources, some of which are produced by the team and used by schools in Shropshire and other LEAs.

65. The sound EDP priority has appropriate activities and, as with literacy, a sensible emphasis on improving the quality of teaching. The success criteria and timescales are insufficiently specific but the action plans have been suitably updated. Support for the numeracy strategy has been built on previous developments in mathematics, particularly the 20-day course to improve teachers' subject knowledge and the RAISE project that gave considerable support to schools. The LEA is strongly committed to effective implementation of the strategy.

66. The numeracy team chose to deliver the five-day intensive training through a one-day-per-week model that has enabled participants to complete a series of tasks

in school between sessions and has been very successful. Schools have received significant, regular support for planning, observation and monitoring of teaching, and numerical target setting. Mathematics co-ordinators receive effective support through termly co-ordinators' meetings and the SDGs, and through release for a half-day each term to review and assess progress.

67. The 36 schools that receive intensive support in 2000-01 were selected through a careful process, which compares performance in mathematics with that in other subjects and draws on primary advisers' knowledge of schools. Sensibly, the group of intensive schools includes not only those whose attainment is low but also those judged to be capable of better performance. The consultancy provided operates flexibly according to schools' needs, for example by dealing with clusters of small schools. A lack of pace and expectation in some intensive schools is being tackled through demonstration lessons and joint planning. A similar number of schools to that in the intensive group has been identified as likely to benefit from an audit and additional support. It is appropriate that priority continues to be given to teachers' subject knowledge.

68. Rightly, further attention is being given to the development of numeracy in secondary schools. Heads of mathematics departments are kept up-to-date about the strategy at termly meetings and training deals with relevant topics, such as the need to amend Year 7 schemes of work to cater for pupils with higher levels of attainment. There are cross-phase projects in some areas of the county and it will soon be possible for Year 7 teachers to observe leading mathematics teachers in primary schools. Two Key Stage 3 numeracy consultants are to be appointed in 2001.

Support for ICT in the curriculum

69. The LEA's support for ICT in the curriculum is unsatisfactory. However, there are indications of improvement.

70. School inspection evidence reveals that pupils progress better in primary than secondary schools in ICT. A number of schools were found not to be providing sufficient opportunities for all pupils to reach the relevant National Curriculum standards in ICT.

71. The LEA is aware of the need for improvement and of schools' dissatisfaction over a number of years. The EDP priority, to improve the provision of ICT in schools in order to enhance learning opportunities and raise achievement, is an appropriate response. The priority has four relevant activities but the updated action plan is still largely aspirational, with little evidence of real progress or achievement. Surprisingly, curricular ICT was not included in the Best Value review recently completed. Nevertheless, its strategy includes a task to initiate a review of support for ICT in the curriculum.

72. There is no clear strategy that schools are able to understand and that links the vision, implied by some LEA documents, with the reality of schools' varied competence and confidence in implementation. Planning lacks clarity and the links between various documents are obscure. The confusion is illustrated by the fact that

there are three implementation models for the current year. A system of termly development plans was introduced in autumn 2000 in an attempt to ensure that the ICT advisory team's work meets the needs of schools by bringing about improvement in small steps and indicating the main focus of work in a term. However, while the activities are appropriate, the rationale is poorly explained.

73. A headteachers' ICT consultative group was formed in 1998, on the establishment of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). Sensible plans are in hand to give it a firmer role, including a monitoring function. The LEA accepts that the implementation of Phase 1 of NGfL was unsatisfactory. Funding was fully devolved to schools before they were ready or able to deal with it. Consequently, all pursued their own courses of action and there was little consistency or coherence.

74. Belatedly, but rightly, a line has been drawn under the past and a fresh start, emphasising pedagogy and management, is being made. Much remains to be done, not least to restore credibility in the schools. Some positive initiatives have been taken such as the introduction of regular and timely newsletters and co-ordinators' meetings, advice on development planning, curriculum support and a head teachers' conference aimed at spreading good practice.

75. However, the LEA is currently in a weak position to assess accurately what pupils know, understand and can do in ICT. The new school reviews include this only in general terms and few schools have continued the more specific work carried out in the primary phase in the past. The LEA recognises that this is a significant weakness. It plans to encourage schools to build assessment into its recommended scheme of work and is working with a number of secondary schools to develop on-line assessment in Key Stage 3.

Support for schools causing concern

76. There are no schools in the authority designated by OFSTED as having serious weaknesses or subject to special measures. Since 1993, only one Shropshire primary school has been judged to require special measures. It was removed from that category within 17 months. In addition, only one school since 1997 has been identified as having serious weaknesses and was found subsequently to have made the necessary progress after a further inspection in June 2000. Since local government review in April 1998, no schools have been identified by OFSTED as requiring special measures or having serious weaknesses. This is an excellent record and one, which reflects the quality of challenge and support, which have been provided to schools by the LEA.

77. The protocols and procedures for identifying and supporting schools identified by the LEA as a cause for concern were set out originally as a statement in the EDP. Although this statement is detailed and identifies the respective roles and responsibilities of the LEA and of schools causing concern, it does not specify clearly the criteria which would be used to decide whether or not to intervene and at what level. In practice, the effective monitoring of good quality performance data, the sharing of information by officers at area meetings and the informal exchange within the department of relevant management information have enabled the LEA to effectively target schools causing concern. Schools rate highly the ability of the LEA

to identify and support schools experiencing difficulties. However, in two of the schools formerly in this category, the school made the initial identification to the attached adviser. As a result, an action plan was agreed and targeted school improvement funding was used to support the plan. In both cases, once this self-referral had been made, the LEA's response was prompt and effective, support was well-targeted and good progress was made to address the weaknesses.

78. There are currently three schools, which have been identified by the LEA as causing concern. Each school has a well-planned programme of support, which is suitably differentiated. Action plans have been drawn up and the attached adviser monitors progress on the plan. Progress reports are made to the headteacher and to the chair of the governing body. Progress in two of the schools has been satisfactory. In the case of the third school, despite intensive LEA support, progress has been limited.

79. The LEA has recently taken steps to review its current practice in monitoring school performance. A revised range of performance indicators using information currently held by services across the department has been discussed in the headteacher consultative groups. This move towards greater transparency in the identification of schools causing concern is a positive development and provides a more coherent system of LEA support. It is also intended that this system would be closely linked with schools' own self-review systems.

Support to governors

80. The LEA's support to governors has several strengths and few significant weaknesses.

81. The support is managed strategically by the assistant director and operationally by area education officers (AEOs). Together they successfully ensure, that the LEA's responsibilities are discharged properly and that appropriate advice and support are given. Good administrative support is provided by the governor support team.

82. Appropriately, support for governors is included in the EDP priority to enhance the quality of leadership and management. The priorities of the sound service action plan emerged from a perceptive analysis of the essential duties of a governing body clerk. The main activities are advice and consultation, clerking and training. The support is strong, effective and highly regarded by schools, which value the service's accessibility and responsiveness.

83. Almost all the schools purchase the LEA's clerking service, which is provided by advisers and senior officers. Governing bodies benefit from the experience and knowledge of their clerks, who are well prepared and provide an effective link with the LEA at a senior level. The clerking service is not provided at full cost and, although highly valued by schools, it is unclear how many would continue to buy it if it were. They do not have the information to judge the cost-effectiveness of the service and those that do not purchase it are financially disadvantaged as their budgets do not benefit by a sum equivalent to the full cost.

84. Training for governors is provided through traded school-based consultancy sessions and an extensive programme of courses that is well matched to the EDP priorities. The charges for this provision are appropriate and schools in the advisory service subscription scheme benefit from a 20 per cent reduction. Governors report that the centrally-provided training is of mixed quality. Some courses, however, such as those on target-setting, performance management and induction for new governors, are very effective, as are school specific consultancies. Nevertheless, the LEA is having limited success in encouraging and training governors to perform their statutory monitoring and evaluation role effectively; further initiatives are planned.

85. The LEA informs governors well. For example, in addition to the updating provided by clerks, governors are sent a clear termly bulletin of information on local and national matters. Succinct written guidance on procedures is given by the governor support team, which also provides a telephone helpline. New governors receive a welcome pack of information but the LEA does not provide a handbook for governors.

86. The procedures for consultation with all governors are not so well developed as those for the provision of information although, again, governing body clerks play an effective role. The Shropshire schools governors council (SSGC) is an independent group that has a productive relationship with the LEA, is involved in the audit and review of training and liaises regularly with officers and members. However, there is no regular forum for the chairs of all governing bodies. Evidence from school visits indicated that this would be welcomed by governors.

Support to school management

87. The LEA provides good support for school management.

88. Management and efficiency and the quality of education in Shropshire schools compare favourably with similar LEAs and the nation as a whole.

89. The EDP priority, to enhance the quality of school leadership and management, is sound and has six relevant activities. The support is well planned and closely targeted to the EDP, headship training plans, and the national standards for headteachers, subject leaders, SEN co-ordinators and entry level teachers.

90. The provision is securely based upon the high quality of relationships, which are both supportive and challenging, between the LEA and the schools. The LEA knows the schools well and allocates the amount of support according to the competence of the individual school's management. Well-led schools are allowed to

develop their autonomy. The strongest feature of the support is the work of the attached advisers. They act as sounding boards, give guidance on a range of issues, such as planning, and support the work of schools in lesson observation and other aspects of monitoring. Their annual performance review of schools is a major contributor to the development of self-review processes in many schools. The LEA's procedures and structures for consulting the senior managers of schools are satisfactory and improving.

91. In addition to its own programme of courses and consultancies, the LEA encourages senior managers to participate in the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) and the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH); good numbers have responded. The LEA, creatively, has offered subsidised places on a higher degree course in educational management, with considerable success. New headteachers are assisted in gaining access to a wide range of induction activities through the leadership and management programme for new headteachers (HEADLAMP), both within Shropshire and elsewhere. Schools are also encouraged to use national quality frameworks, such as Investors in People. However, in disseminating good practice, the LEA makes limited use of the skills and experience within the schools, such as trained headteacher mentors, accredited inspectors and Beacon schools.

92. Shropshire is an accredited provider of the OFSTED school self-evaluation course and provides suitably adapted versions for schools in all phases. These have been well received by schools. In the primary phase, the training builds on the effective collaborative work of attached advisers and heads. In secondary schools, the quality and extent of self-review procedures are more variable. The LEA has identified this as a priority and has established a working party of secondary headteachers. In practice, attached advisers validate the self-review processes of individual schools but the LEA has yet to agree with schools a consistent system of validation.

93. The LEA's extensive training provision is often effective, particularly when provided within individual schools: for example, training to help subject leaders meet national standards has been purchased by roughly 40 per cent of schools so far. The authority has also perceptively re-interpreted the criteria from the national standards for subject leaders to fit the needs of pastoral managers and, currently, about a third of secondary schools have purchased the associated school specific training. The LEA is fully meeting its statutory responsibilities through its very good provision for newly qualified teachers.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for ICT in the curriculum:

- devise a realistic strategy for curricular ICT that links vision with implementation, includes a clear development process and takes appropriate account of the varied needs and circumstances of schools;

- establish firm links between priority 8 of the EDP and other ICT plans so that the route to improvement is clear; and
- work with schools to establish effective systems to assess what pupils know, understand and can do in ICT.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

94. The council has a good history of corporate planning. In its corporate plan 'Shropshire in Focus 2000/01', the council set four key priorities: environmental sustainability, health improvement, social inclusion and 'transforming the county council'. Only later in the document does it state: 'a first class education for all young people will continue to be our priority.' In the draft corporate plan for 2001/02, the council has replaced the priority of health improvement with that of lifelong learning, thus elevating the focus on education. Schools are not familiar with this change of emphasis. In practice, however, all political parties, senior officers and schools agreed that education had been an established priority of the council for a decade, evidenced by the protection of school budgets and education spending during a period of austerity. The corporate plan is suitably updated and monitored but its priorities are not always congruent with those of the Best Value Performance Plan.

95. The Education Development Plan and departmental service plans are directly and overtly linked to the corporate plan in their objectives and activities. Links to plans in other departments are improving and there is a new, corporate working spirit amongst a relatively recently appointed group of chief officers, deliberately re-titled 'corporate directors'. This is reflected in practical developments such as the establishment of the joint-funded, multi-disciplinary team supporting the needs of children in public care, but is at an early stage of development in some strategic areas such as the need for an over-arching approach to the needs of children with behavioural difficulties.

96. The modernised council structure promotes corporate and partnership working and minimises party political dissent, successfully concentrating members' minds on policies which will sustain the high standards that its schools and pupils attain. In an authority where political control has changed hands three times in the last four years, there are close working relationships between experienced members from different parties and between members and the corporate director. The modernised structure has speeded up decision-making but opposition members complain that it has reduced transparency. Whilst most advice given to members is sound, they have requested more financial details from officers, especially regarding schools' budgets. In June 2001 there are firm plans to modernise further, moving to a full cabinet and leading member structure.

97. Committee papers on budgetary matters are clear and of high quality. The draft corporate and financial plan begins to illustrate both the links between aligning resources to delivering service objectives and the relationship between SSA, council tax and expenditure across the council. Unfortunately, the schools visited displayed a lack of knowledge of either the existence of the plan, or of the messages it conveyed. However, significant improvements in most aspects are apparent. The current round of budget discussions with headteachers has been very well received and they consistently recorded their appreciation of the clarity and finality of the financial information they were given.

98. The quality of leadership given by the corporate director and senior managers is very good. Despite a significant turnover of senior staff in the last two years, the department's senior managers have improved further the quality of services provided to schools and pupils who continue to show improvement in attainment and progress. Both in the school survey and during visits to schools there was universal praise for the 'listening' style of leadership that was considered to be very school-focused. The LEA has been particularly sensitive and successful in managing its contribution to the transfer of schools from grant maintained to foundation status. Despite initial resistance to the separation of Telford and Wrekin from Shropshire, continuing joint arrangements have been seamlessly implemented. The LEA's senior managers have the capacity to tackle weaknesses.

99. The council has been reasonably successful in collaborating with other agencies, although opportunities provided through grant-related funding are limited. There has been some successful, social regeneration, developmental work with the 'Shropshire Partnership' and creative use of New Opportunities Funding. Relationships with the Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise and the new Learning Skills Council are positive. Joint work with the health trust has led to the promotion of the Schools for Health scheme which has resulted in measurable successes such as a decrease in teenage smoking.

Education Action Zone

100. The LEA provided effective support in the formulation of the bid for EAZ status, particularly in supporting the action plan and linking it with the EDP, and in the provision of data. The LEA is represented on the EAZ's executive board and is constantly in touch with its programmes. A senior adviser assesses value added in the zone and, when it was set up, he evaluated the performance of all 21 schools in the zone with the EAZ director and an attached adviser. The LEA has aggregated performance data for the whole zone.

101. There has been effective co-operation between the LEA and the EAZ in relation to school improvement. The zone's literacy, numeracy and ICT consultants liaise and meet with their LEA counterparts. In the case of ICT, the EAZ is strengthening technical support and training in the schools. The EAZ, LEA and North Shropshire College are working together to bring broadband ICT network to the area. The zone's director is a member of the LEA working party on more able pupils and the 2000 summer school was held in a school in the EAZ.

102. The corporate director for education services meets the zone's director regularly and the LEA has provided a range of advice on curricular, legal, management, personnel and property matters. There is also collaboration with a number of other services, including childcare, educational psychology, health, social and youth, on issues such as sexual health, social inclusion and the Sure Start project.

Management services

103. Shropshire offers its schools a range of services, via service level agreements (SLAs) which offer good value for money and are generally highly

regarded by schools who consequently are happy to buy into the great majority of them at levels appropriate to their needs. Improvements in the presentation of marketing materials are in hand, as is the move to separate the charging structure from the amount delegated. Service managers have responded well to delegation, have good plans for developing their services, and are customer focused.

104. Good **financial support** is offered, by officers from the education department and the corporate finance division. The latter offer payroll, audit and exchequer services traded where appropriate, and schools report high levels of satisfaction and buy-back. The education team offers three levels of service to suit schools' needs, and here again schools are very satisfied. School budgets are closely monitored and there are sound protocols for problems to be identified and acted upon. Balances and deficits are well known and all deficits have agreed recovery plans.

105. Individual school finance officers are well regarded and they are helping schools to improve their financial management capacity, but they are impeded by the outdated means of providing schools with data. The paper-based tabulations are cumbersome, unclear, and are an inefficient means of communicating with schools.

106. **Personnel services** are also highly rated by schools, who have access to the service via a range of SLAs to cover administrative and casework operations. Buy-back and satisfaction levels are high, and there is good work in place to monitor long-term sickness, followed up by a range of strategies to support teachers on their return to work.

107. The role and function of three **area education officers** was unclear in half the schools visited. They offer quasi-legal advice, act as a conduit to other LEA and council services and provide support to governing bodies. Although all these functions are performed well, not all are necessary, and restrict the promotion of school autonomy.

Best Value review of client services

108. This is a relatively small-scale operation involving only 1.2 full-time equivalent staff, and an appropriate level of resource has been devoted to the review process. The degree of challenge is rather limited, and is restricted by a lack of clarity about who the customer is and therefore who pays for the service. There is evidence of some consultation, but there is little on how costs compare and what competitors or other LEAs are offering.

109. Those schools who purchase it see the service as satisfactory, but it is unlikely to improve until the Best Value review action plan provides the solution to the questions posed in the final conclusion.

Administrative ICT and Best Value review

110. Overall the administrative ICT infrastructure, support and strategy in Shropshire are limited and there is an unsatisfactory linkage with curriculum ICT strategy. Shropshire has been slow in establishing a robust ICT infrastructure partly

owing to its topography, but in the main reflecting the absence of a coherent strategic lead. This is unsatisfactory in a county where investment could have brought about significant improvements in economy, efficiency and communications.

111. Shropshire has delegated most funding for ICT to schools, relying on them to respond to central guidance and recommendation in fulfilling their administrative hardware and software requirements. There are few direct links with central ICT systems, which in turn are not integrated and often operate in parallel, duplicating information and data, with consequent inefficiency and burdening of schools. Although electronic mail is used within the council, traffic with schools is minimal, with most data being transferred by disk or paper.

112. ICT hardware and software support is satisfactory. It is provided through SITSS (Shropshire information technology support service) which is based in the information technology services department. In the past schools have registered concerns about the performance of this service but following a reorganisation, the service has improved considerably.

113. Many of the weaknesses and limitations in administrative ICT have been recognised and are now incorporated in an action plan to be implemented alongside Shropshire's intended broadband strategy. The plan has emerged from a completed Best Value review (BVR) of education administrative ICT strategy. This process, which has used the council's Best Value review toolkit, has been of use in prompting progress. The review's conclusions are unsurprising, identifying an action plan which will bring Shropshire into line with good practice elsewhere. The plan's targets are appropriate and achievable, but conservative. The timescales are generous and the resourcing arrangements lack specificity. In particular, it acknowledges the need for the establishment of a common basic dataset, a management information strategy and protocols to ensure that schools are not overburdened with data requests. It helpfully identifies, for elected members, the need for a more coherent approach to ICT within the council and across the education directorate. Staff within the directorate have been appropriately involved in reviewing their current practices and procedures, but there has been too little active involvement in the process by schools and elected members.

114. Overall, the BVR has been too narrowly focused, although staff managing the process, have usefully visited some other authorities. Outcomes have been monitored internally by the departmental management team, headteacher groups and members: this was deemed to have provided the necessary challenge to the review. However, headteachers' knowledge of the process was modest and the process overall was insufficient. The absence of comparative costs, knowledge of own costs, rigour of fundamental challenge, the exclusion of curriculum ICT and review of alternative supporting infrastructures all have meant that, as a BVR, it is incomplete.

Best Value review of secondary education

115. Secondary education was selected for review during the first year of the Best Value cycle, an unusual choice considering it is a function that is performed well. It was acknowledged early on in the process, when the terms of reference were

agreed, that the aspects of secondary education identified for review were aspects of the council's statutory duty to secure secondary education. For this reason, the Best Value framework was not fully applied, in particular the element of competition.

116. The scope and focus of the BVR were broad, encompassing as follows:

- the provision of school places;
- the number of pupils with special educational needs being educated in secondary schools; their level of need and the level of funding provided for them;
- the level of funding being provided for 11-16 and 11-18 schools;
- the performance of schools as assessed in OFSTED reports; and
- the attainment of secondary pupils at ages 14, 16 and 18.

117. In all aspects of the review, Shropshire's performance was compared appropriately with that of its statistical neighbours. Comparing the performance of schools and pupils' attainment resulted in few surprises for the LEA given the quality of performance data maintained centrally. However, it was more difficult to compare levels of funding for SEN in secondary schools since models for the delegation of SEN funds vary widely among LEAs. The appropriateness of this element for the review was further brought into question by the fact that a separate review of special educational needs was also underway. However, the review did usefully establish that whilst the funding for pupils with statements is clearly identified within the school's delegated budget, other resources are allocated in a variety of complex formulae making it difficult to identify accurately the resources available and to manage them efficiently in schools. Comparison with other authorities was therefore difficult, nor were comparisons made of school transport costs or capital costs.

118. The involvement of secondary schools in the review process was limited although headteachers and chairs of governors of all secondary schools were invited to consider the findings of the review and some made suggestions for improvement in response to a questionnaire. These suggestions related to strategies to raise attainment at ages 14 and 16 and to clarifying the budget for secondary schools. Overall, however, consultation was weak in that it did not include any pupils, parents, prospective parents or residents.

119. The review of pupil attainment has resulted in an action plan which rightly focuses on those aspects in need of further development, most notably the attainment of boys and of all pupils at Key Stage 3 and in sixth forms. Some of the necessary actions are already being implemented through existing plans such as the EDP. Nonetheless, this review will further heighten awareness and contribute directly towards the desirable improvements. Otherwise, existing strengths are identified in a function that is generally well performed.

Recommendations

In order to improve the management capacity of schools:

- establish electronic links between schools' and central financial systems as a matter of urgency;

- ensure that the ICT strategy for education is comprehensive and convergent to include both administrative and curriculum activities;
- review the role and function of area education officers; and
- take expedient action to answer the fundamental questions posed by the Best Value review on ICT support for school administration.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

The LEA strategy for SEN

120. The LEA has a clear policy for SEN that is related to the Code of Practice for special educational needs. It makes appropriate reference, and has responded well to the national agenda for inclusion, primarily owing to a necessity to meet the needs of individual pupils in a diverse and largely rural community. Mainstream schools are responsive to the special educational needs of pupils and work co-operatively with support services to ensure that pupils are educated in a mainstream setting within their local community wherever possible. This is enhanced by good quality, additionally resourced provision in 11 identified schools and all secondary schools which are additionally funded for group learning support.

121. Members and officers are committed to the needs of pupils with SEN and have ensured that corporate and education policy and priorities are inter-related and link to the national agenda. No EDP priority directly refers to SEN as a separate issue, but it is included in all of the priorities ensuring an inclusive and responsive planning mechanism, and the policy is appropriately articulated in Annex 4 of the EDP.

122. The SEN strategy is clear: it reflects the LEA policy; it tackles the right issues; it is sequential and has sensible timescales. However, it is not clear to schools and parents what the LEA's desired pattern of provision would look like in the longer term. In particular, some schools are unaware of what the LEA intends to do to manage the growing number of increasingly complex medical and social needs of pupils. Service development planning relates closely to the strategy and is regularly monitored, reviewed and amended.

123. Evaluation is less well established, although there is a growing bank of evidence through two SEN surveys and several smaller support service surveys. The LEA uses the information gathered to plan for short and medium term improvements.

Meeting statutory duties

124. The LEA has significantly improved its response to statutory regulation for pupils with SEN. The proportion of pupils with a statement of SEN remains high, but modest reductions since 1998 reflect a strategic shift of emphasis towards early, rather than statutory, intervention.

125. SEN administration continues to improve with updated criteria statements for disability groupings and effective systems to record processes. Nine out of ten statements, above the county and national averages, are prepared within time limits set by national guidelines, when advice is received on time. Much less satisfactory, from a parent's viewpoint, is that late medical advice means, in actuality, only seven per cent are actually issued within the 18-week period. The 'moderating panel', which advises on the issuing of statements, only deals with subjectively selected cases.

126. Statements are well written and enable schools to write individual education plans that are working documents with specific and measurable targets. However, the LEA has not given enough attention to monitoring the contribution of officers at, or after, annual reviews. It is insufficiently rigorous in its decision-making process with regard to maintaining, amending or ceasing to maintain a statement, and thereby recycling resources to meet other emergent needs.

127. An overdue but very effective independent parent-partnership scheme was established in 2000.

School improvement

128. The service provided by the SEN advisory team is of a high quality, with effective planning, support and intervention mechanisms and is well embedded in local, regional and national initiatives. Training provided is extensive and gives access to accredited programmes for school SEN co-ordinators, specialist teachers and assistants.

129. Schools value the support provided by the various services and describe significant benefits of the co-location of services into a central provision. Most services have an established cycle of development, action planning and review, which ensures that practices are well monitored and that successful initiatives are replicated and refined over time. The psychology service has suffered from staffing shortages, which have now been alleviated. Their work in schools is primarily statutory and reactive and insufficient emphasis is given to preventative work in schools, for earlier intervention in support of the shift in LEA strategy. The LEA is rightly considering modelling a combined service for pupils with sensory impairments on the very successful existing service for pupils with hearing impairments.

130. The LEA has made some modest progress in measuring improvements in pupils attainment and progress. One special school measures pupils' attainment on P scales and is able to compare with a similar cohort in a Telford and Wrekin school. In another small project called Word Workshop, supported by Standards Funds, the impact of the learning support advisory teacher's intervention on improvements in pupils' reading is being implemented and evaluated.

Value for money

131. The funding of SEN has not been well planned, with reactive responses to emerging needs. Elected members lack understanding of the complex issues surrounding long-term planning and the increased incidence of medical and social issues. Significantly, they have not challenged the need to regularly approve overspends. The regularity and scale of such overspending is an indicator of weaknesses in financial planning and management.

132. From April 2000 to January 2001, the LEA delegated £131,000 ("3F" funding) to support 200 pupils at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice in mainstream schools. Although this '3F' funding successfully shifted resources from statutory to non-statutory intervention, it was unsustainable in the longer term without clear criteria for equitable decision-making. The LEA is currently consulting with schools about a

significant increase in the levels of delegation of funds to support the needs of pupils with statements and at Stage 3. Funding levels will be linked to categorisations and severity of pupils' needs. This is a welcome development in line with Government policy although the long-term impact on existing staff is unknown. Two-thirds of the schools visited were knowledgeable about the developments reflecting good overall levels of consultation through Special Education Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) meetings and other valued forums. Although the changes are generally welcomed, schools are naturally anxious about them.

133. The levels of funding for SEN are low and outcomes are satisfactory or better. However, considering the weaknesses in financial management, value for money, on balance, is satisfactory.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision for children with special educational needs:

- liaise with advice givers in the statutory assessment process thereby improve response times, thus ensuring that parents and pupils receive the results of statutory assessments in a timely way; and
- enhance the role of the statutory assessment moderating panel and respond rigorously to the outcomes of annual reviews.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

Planning school places

134. A small team of officers is carrying out this function very efficiently and effectively, in the challenging context of a large county with many small, evenly spaced settlements.

135. The surplus place indicators are unexceptional apart from the relatively high number of primary schools with more than 25 per cent surplus capacity, reflecting the presumption of the council in favour of maintaining small schools in its rural areas. This is not to say that the LEA is complacent. It has a policy which aims to have a minimum school size of three teachers, but which also recognises the need for flexibility to circumstances. A thorough investigation of all small schools has been undertaken with a view to potential closures, amalgamations and federations. The District Auditor confirmed that having examined all options, the potential for reducing unit costs was minimal, and members were advised accordingly. However, individual cases are continuously assessed on their merits. Although the school organisation committee has met regularly, its business has been relatively uncontentious; nevertheless it has sought an appropriate range of advice and training.

136. Arrangements to implement the infant class size pledge have been successful, and capacity has been added for this purpose and wherever other basic need has been demonstrated. The school organisation plan helpfully explains the derivation of good place planning data. Although they can request it, primary schools in particular do not have an annual opportunity to check and add their local knowledge to the pupil forecasting data.

Admissions

137. The LEA carries out this function well, has sound plans for improvements, and offers good value for money. Performance indicators for satisfying parental preference, numbers and outcomes of appeals are all in line with comparators, with appeals being completed by early June. Information for parents is well presented, with complex issues very clearly explained and the admissions criteria meet the requirements of the relevant code of practice. An admissions forum has been established and it is dealing with appropriate matters.

138. The LEA has recently taken responsibility for administration and the stricter adherence to admissions criteria is an improvement, although there is slippage in the return of application forms by parents of primary pupils. In some small primary schools with low admission numbers, the policy of three intakes to reception classes can lead to an unsatisfactory educational and social impact upon the pupils concerned.

Asset management and property services

139. Headteachers in Shropshire paint a refreshingly positive picture of the excellent work done by the LEA on property matters; they are right to do so.

Although it is true that relevant officers are expert, that there has been regular, planned investment, and that documentation is clear and accurate, it is not these factors which set the performance of Shropshire apart. The level of customer focus seen here is the main reason why Shropshire schools rated this area of operation highest of all LEAs so far inspected.

140. The LEA has worked consistently to some simple but effective principles. These include: a focus on helping schools to achieve what they need to improve performance; imaginative solutions to problems involving regulations and funding; officers from various areas of the council providing consistent advice; involving schools in decisions; reaching shared agreements on priorities and funding mechanisms.

141. The council has also provided schools with such a comprehensive range of service level agreements for property maintenance that all schools feel able to purchase a level of service appropriate to their needs. This, together with a good Asset Management Plan, and the relationship with schools outlined above has placed Shropshire in a strong position to take full advantage of any new investment by central Government to further improve on their building stock.

Promoting social inclusion

142. Priority six of the EDP to increase social inclusion through positive behaviour management, reducing exclusions and improving provision for those excluded is closely linked to one of the four corporate priorities. The LEA has made a successful start on the first two objectives of this sequential model, but had little impact on the third. This is reflected in the successful fulfilment of two thirds of its activities under this priority.

Support for improving attendance

143. The LEA's support for improving pupils' attendance in schools is sound. Attendance at school in Shropshire is good: the level of attendance at all secondary schools is above 90 per cent and the level of unauthorised absence only exceeds one per cent (and is never more than 1.3 per cent) in two primary schools and three secondary schools. Most identified unauthorised absence is supported by parental collusion. The LEA has set challenging targets to reduce further levels of unauthorised absence by 2002: in secondary schools, the interim target has been achieved and in primary schools, exceeded.

144. The education welfare service (EWS) which is managed by Telford and Wrekin LEA, has developed its policy, planning and procedures at a modest pace. Prompted by the recommendations of a District Audit report, it is consulting on a draft policy and procedure document which is sound, except that the first response to unexplained pupil absence recommended to schools is too slow. The responsibilities of schools and the EWS are clear, as are referral triggers and criteria.

145. Recently the service has developed good quality and well-presented data, which clearly highlights any schools causing concern. The service is deployed in the light of this knowledge and those schools causing concern have simple action plans

to remedy the problem. Good use is also made of Standards Fund monies in targeting additional quality support for schools in areas of comparatively high need. However, few of the schools visited understood the basis upon which the core service was deployed. Considering the very low level of unauthorised absence, particularly in most primary schools, there is little rationale behind the regular and expensive visiting of such schools. The prevalence of truancy is modest and the LEA uses targeted methods of school specific blitzes and area sweeps proportionately.

146. Schools hold the service in high regard. The service is flexible to demand whilst working within general guidelines. The overall costs of the service are well below national averages but in line with similar authorities.

Support for improving behaviour in schools

147. The LEA's Behaviour Support Plan and support for improving behaviour in schools are sound. The quality of data presented is exceptionally good. Behaviour is judged to be good in all secondary schools inspected since 1997: this is an excellent outcome, to which the LEA has contributed. A small behaviour support service provides primary schools with relevant advice and direct teaching to support pupils placed at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice: secondary schools can buy into a sensibly packaged range of services from the same team, which is managed by Telford and Wrekin LEA. The teachers in the team spend a laudably high proportion of time in schools, thus adding to their credibility, particularly in the primary schools visited, although half complained of slow response times. The LEA also successfully supports units attached to two of the mainstream schools visited. Comparative costs are very low, thus value for money is high.

148. The number of pupils permanently excluded from schools is low compared to similar authorities and nationally. The LEA has set challenging targets to reduce this number further: the target for 1999-2000 was 46, the number excluded was 23. This is another outstanding achievement by schools, supported by the LEA in terms of excellent guidance and procedures which focus on prevention and the appointment of an 'inclusion officer' to support pupils and schools. Less successful have been strategies to reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions which exceeded 100 in each of four secondary schools in 1999-2000. Also, it is of concern that the numbers of permanent exclusions in the autumn term 2000 has shown an upward trend, reaching 19.

149. The LEA, along with Telford and Wrekin LEA, commissioned an authoritative research report on emotional and behavioural difficulties, policy, practice and provision. This inspection endorses the recommendations of this report with the exception, in Shropshire, of the implied recommendation to expand, and add central resources to, the behaviour support team. The consequence of such a decision would be to reduce funding directly available to schools for this purpose and would be a disproportionate response to the scale of the problem in Shropshire schools. We share the LEA's view that any expansion of such a service would be on a traded basis with schools.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

150. The LEA's continuum of provision for pupils with behavioural difficulties outside mainstream schools is inadequate, as is its strategic response. There are no pupil referral units, the legal status of the tuition centres is unclear, and the only school catering for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties is unstable and a cause for considerable concern.

151. In the absence of pupil referral unit provision, education otherwise than at school for pupils who are permanently excluded, at risk of exclusion or with unmanageable behaviour problems is largely delivered through the provision of 'tuition centres/groups. There are seven tuition centres situated in various community locations in Shropshire towns.

152. On the positive side, LEA record keeping is good, tuition centres have a good record of entering 96 per cent of pupils for accredited examinations at the end of Key Stage 4 and the commitment of centre based staff is high. They eliminate the need for home tuition, which would be expensive and not cost-effective in a LEA of this geographic size. But weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths: provision is only part-time, and less than half-time for most secondary aged pupils; there are waiting lists; there are health and safety concerns for staff and pupils; accommodation is frequently in shared community provision and unsuitable and the centres are isolated from mainstream provision. In terms of legal status, they are neither schools nor pupil referral units, thus they are not subject to the control and accountabilities of a governing body or external scrutiny by OFSTED. The LEA is over-reliant on these centres and lacks an adequate continuum of provision to meet the demanding needs of this cohort of pupils. It has recognised this and is well-advanced in its plans to take the necessary action.

153. There is a modest range of alternative employment and college based provision for Year 11 pupils. Often these are individual schemes arranged by schools. Again, a more strategic approach would build increased capacity in this sphere. The allocation of £100,000 growth in the 2001/02 budget for the purpose of increasing levels of provision to all excluded pupils to 25 hours per week is a positive indication that the LEA is taking seriously its responsibilities for the future education of these pupils.

Support for children in public care

154. The council has taken its corporate parenting responsibilities seriously establishing appropriate policies, procedures and priorities. It has taken the positive, recent step of creating a multi-disciplinary team of staff to assess, monitor and meet the needs of children in public care. They are welcomed in schools where they visit termly if a child in Shropshire's care is on roll, although the effectiveness of such monitoring is not yet measurable. Levels of attainment are generally in line with national averages but cohorts are very small and the data is not statistically significant. Training has been made available to schools and 60 per cent of schools, in line with national guidance, have a teacher designated for the purpose of monitoring such pupils. However, there is less rigour in personal education planning

in statutory childcare reviews. Overall, the LEA is making good progress in supporting the improvement in the educational attainment of children in public care.

155. An issue, geographically specific to Shropshire, is the number of school-age children (140), from other authorities, placed in small, independent children's homes in the county who will then request educational provision in addition to making demands on other public services. This places considerable pressure on specialist education, particularly that which is provided for children with behavioural difficulties.

Health, safety and protection of pupils

156. Shropshire has in place satisfactory policies, procedures and documentation to carry out its statutory responsibilities and support its schools in this function. Good links exist between the education department and health and safety officers in the central safety unit, with incident reports being routinely collected from schools and systematically analysed. There have been no recent reports from the Health and Safety Executive.

157. The LEA and its schools have sound child protection procedures in place. Ninety per cent of designated teachers in schools have received appropriate and good quality training: this is a comparatively high figure but still leaves gaps. LEA officers are well represented on the area child protection committee but the lack of headteacher or teacher representation is a weakness.

Minority ethnic and Traveller children

158. The proportion of minority ethnic pupils (1.6 per cent), of whom half have English as an additional language, is small. Support to 37 schools is provided by the schools' multicultural development service (SMDS) purchased from Telford and Wrekin. Visits to schools and the school survey confirm that the quality of this support is satisfactory.

159. Training and support for schools are effectively targeted. Specific action to raise attainment for those pupils at risk of underachievement is an identified element within the LEA guidance for inclusion in school development plans. SMDS staff provide effective training and advice on school based strategies and the attached adviser monitors progress against targets within the school development plan.

160. The LEA currently holds GCSE attainment data by ethnic group, but target-setting is in its early stages. All schools have recently submitted ethnicity data for pupils on roll. The LEA is now in a better position to meet the DfEE requirement to set targets for separate minority ethnic groups by 2002. Recent training provided by the PRRU has focused clearly on this aspect of target setting.

161. The LEA is a member of the West Midlands consortium education service for Travelling children (WMESTC) which is managed by Wolverhampton LEA. Gypsies are Shropshire's oldest and largest minority ethnic group. The support for meeting the needs of travelling pupils is well managed and effective. There are good links with the education welfare service and other agencies within the county. The LEA, on behalf of WMESTC, has piloted an approach to gathering information and data on

all Gypsy and Traveller children, not just those supported by the service. This information will enable the LEA to undertake more comprehensive monitoring of pupil attainment.

Measures to combat racism

162. Progress on measures to combat racism in schools has been slow. In the last year, the LEA has consulted with schools to develop comprehensive guidance and criteria for the recording of racial incidents in schools. The first annual survey was undertaken in summer 2000 with a response rate of only fifty per cent of schools. The outcomes of this survey were subsequently presented to the education scrutiny panel in the autumn term and to governing bodies this term. SMDS staff have also provided a good range of training in order to develop a wider understanding of the recommendations of the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence and their implications for schools. The LEA's ethnic minority and Travellers achievement grant (EMTAG) action plan identifies the issue of racism experienced by some isolated families from minority ethnic groups living in all white areas. However, there is no overall strategy at LEA level, which clearly defines how this issue will be tackled.

Gifted and talented pupils

163. LEA provision for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory. A working group of advisers, officers and school staff have developed comprehensive guidance for schools on support for the more able pupil. The recently published guidance incorporates some very useful case studies and exemplar programmes of activities based on experiences in local schools. The LEA's evaluation of a neighbouring authority's Excellence in Cities programme will be mutually beneficial and will contribute to further developments for gifted and talented pupils in the county.

Recommendations

In order to target the education welfare service more closely to need:

- clearly quantify for each school the amount of service each can expect; and
- allocate the service according to need, specifically minimising the service offered to schools in the primary phase which have good rates of attendance and minimal levels of unauthorised absence.

In order to improve the provision of education otherwise than at school:

- set out and implement a strategy for improving the continuum of provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) outside mainstream schools which –
 - if retaining the tuition centres, as a matter of urgency, establishes them within a statutory context;
 - improves provision in EBD special schools; and
 - expands alternatives at Key Stage 4.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve budget planning:

- agree clear and ambitious performance targets and make them central to decisions about resource distribution; and
- give stakeholders more opportunity to understand and influence the generation and distribution of resources to effect agreed performance outcomes.

In order to gain maximum benefit from the Best Value approach:

- raise stakeholders understanding of BV principles;
- ensure that elected members take the lead in carrying out their reviewing and scrutiny responsibilities;
- provide guidance to schools on their approach to BV principles. Require and monitor responses in line with government guidance; and
- take expedient action to answer the fundamental questions posed by the BVR on ICT support for school administration.

In order to improve support for ICT in the curriculum:

- devise a realistic strategy for curricular ICT that links vision with implementation, includes a clear development process and takes appropriate account of the varied needs and circumstances of schools;
- establish firm links between priority 8 of the EDP and other ICT plans so that the route to improvement is clear; and
- work with schools to establish effective systems to assess what pupils know, understand and can do in ICT.

In order to improve the management capacity of schools:

- establish electronic links between schools' and central financial systems as a matter of urgency;
- ensure that the ICT strategy for education is comprehensive and convergent to include both administrative and curriculum activities; and
- review the role and function of area education officers.

In order to improve provision for children with special educational needs:

- liaise with advice givers in the statutory assessment process thereby improve response times, thus ensuring that parents and pupils receive the results of statutory assessments in a timely way; and
- enhance the role and constitution of the statutory assessment moderating panel and respond rigorously to the outcomes of annual reviews.

In order to target the education welfare service more closely to need:

- clearly quantify for each school the amount of service each can expect; and
- allocate the service according to need, specifically minimising the service offered to schools in the primary phase which have good rates of attendance and little unauthorised absence.

In order to improve the provision of education otherwise than at school:

- set out and implement a strategy for improving the continuum of provision of education for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) outside mainstream schools which –
 - if retaining the tuition centres, as a matter of urgency, establishes them within a statutory context;
 - improves provision in EBD special schools; and
 - expands alternatives at Key Stage 4.

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