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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement.

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 110 schools. The response rate was 79 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to eight primary schools, five secondaries, three special schools and two pupil referral units (PRUs). 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 that 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.

COMMENTARY

4. Worcestershire is a new shire authority, established on 1 April 1998 following local government re-organisation (LGR). On Countywide socio-economic measures, the LEA appears comparatively favoured. These conceal some variation; ward information indicates pockets of urban disadvantage. However, the highest rate of unemployment (in Redditch) is, at four per cent, significantly below average, both for the West Midlands and for the United Kingdom.

5. Despite serving a relatively advantaged population, the LEA's schools perform at a level which is broadly average against national figures. Performance at the ages of seven, fourteen and sixteen is in line with similar authorities, but below the average for these authorities in mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 2. This level of underperformance is not a position with which the LEA can be satisfied, and the need to raise attainment and the aspirations of schools is recognised both by elected Members and LEA officers. The LEA has grasped the opportunity provided by LGR to revitalise and renew many of the structures for school improvement.

6. It is too soon to gauge whether these are leading to enhanced school effectiveness. What can be said is that the LEA has made a good start in planning for school improvement and in involving schools and others in that planning. Decision-making is open and effective. Senior officers work closely with elected Members, and have provided good leadership in setting appropriate aims for the new authority and in ensuring that these are reflected in the Council's work.

7. The LEA performs the great majority of its functions at least adequately, and some very well. Among the latter are:-

- some aspects of support for pupils with special educational needs (SEN);
- support provided through Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) for preventing exclusions and re-integrating excluded pupils into mainstream;
- support for school management, particularly in the areas of finance, human resources and property maintenance.

8. The weaknesses, which are very few, include:-

- support for the use of ICT in administration and management in schools;
- support for the attainment of ethnic minority pupils;
- the targeting of inspectorate support to areas of greatest need.

9. The LEA has a relatively low education budget. Where areas of spending are higher than in similar authorities, it has taken action to reduce these. It is carefully preparing for the required delegation to schools from April 2000. Financial management is effective and external funding is assiduously sought. The strategy for determining value for money is clearly articulated within service plans and comprises measurable targets in specified timescales. Overall the LEA provides good quality services at a low cost.

10. The LEA has tackled some difficult issues early in its life. These have included schools re-organisations in two areas and action to reduce the very high home-to-school transport costs for various groups, including pupils attending denominational schools. In our view, this latter action took place over too short a timescale and with insufficiently detailed consultation, causing much resentment from specific groups of parents. This lack of forward planning early in the LEA's life was not reflected in other consultation exercises.

11. The LEA is well regarded by its schools. This is partly because it provides generally efficient services at a low cost, although there is scope for further delegation. The vigour and determination, which characterise much of its work, are important qualities. As in other LEAs, however, the main impediment to enhanced effectiveness lies in the functions of challenge and support.

12. The main responsibility for these functions lies with the Quality Division. This includes an inspectorate which is strong in the quality of its personnel and in many ways well managed. For example, where weaknesses in schools have been identified, monitoring and support have been largely effective and few schools have been judged to have serious weaknesses or to require special measures. The service is not, however, adequately deployed to support school autonomy. Through an interpretation of its functions which lays too much stress on supporting all schools, irrespective of need, it dilutes the accountability that should rest with headteachers and governors. In some schools, this reinforces a dependency culture. The LEA recognises, and has begun to act on the need to improve school self-review, but should consider further the levels of support which complement this.

13. Therefore, despite the many strengths this report notes, we believe that a shift in emphasis is required if the LEA is to become as effective as it should be. The onus for improvement needs to be squarely transferred to schools and support by the LEA should take place more visibly in inverse proportion to success. The will and understanding to make that transfer exist. The LEA now needs to demonstrate this by carrying out the recommendations in this report.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

14. Worcestershire is a new shire authority, established on 1 April 1998, following local government re-organisation. It serves a population of 532,000 and has over 81,000 pupils of statutory school age. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs (2.9 per cent) is in line with national figures. The County is large and varied. It is an area of small towns and villages, generally affluent but with pockets of disadvantage. The County unemployment rate of 2.9 per cent compares favourably with the West Midlands region (4.8 per cent) and the United Kingdom (4.4 per cent), but varies at district level from 2.2 per cent to 4.0 per cent. Redditch has the highest rate at 4.0 per cent. Take-up of free school meals is low in both primary and secondary schools when compared with national figures.

15. The minority ethnic communities comprised 1.5 per cent of the total population in the 1991 census, compared to the national figure of 5.5 per cent. This proportion varies considerably, reaching as high as 34.1 per cent in one of Worcester's wards. Pupils from ethnic minorities comprise 2.3 per cent of the school population compared with ten per cent in the country as a whole. There are 330 Traveller children currently on roll in Worcestershire schools.

16. The authority maintains one nursery school, 189 primary and first schools, 39 middle schools, of which 31 are deemed secondary, 30 secondary schools, 13 special schools and nine pupil referral units (PRUs). Fifty-five primary schools, almost 30 per cent, have rolls of less than 100. There is a combination of two and three tier systems in the County and children can move school at the ages of 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13. The percentage of four and five year olds on the roll of a primary school is 56.4 per cent.

Performance

17. At all stages of education, Worcestershire children attain broadly in line with those in schools nationally and in line with or below those in the authority's statistical neighbours.

- At the end of Key Stage 1, performance at level 2 in National Curriculum tests in 1998 was in line with statistical neighbours and all LEAs. Performance at higher levels was above average in reading, writing and mathematics.
- At the end of Key Stage 2, performance in English was similar to that of statistical neighbours and all LEAs, while, in mathematics and science, pupils performed in line with the national average at level 4 or above but below the statistical neighbours' average. Provisional results for 1999 show continued attainment close to the national average, with a rise in English slightly below the national rise, and in mathematics slightly above.

- By the age of 14, pupils' performance at the expected level, was at the national and statistical neighbours' averages in English and mathematics and above national average in science.
- Pupils' performance in GCSE examinations was close to national averages on all measures but below statistical neighbours for the proportion gaining five or more A*-C grades and one or more A*-G grades. Pass rates for vocational qualifications were similarly in line with national averages. The rate of improvement in the five or more A*-C figure was below the national rate between 1994 and 1998 but above the national rate between 1998 and 1999.
- This average performance continued at the age of 18 for pupils taking two or more A levels, for those taking less than 2 A Levels, and for advanced and intermediate GNVQ.

18. The LEA has now analysed the attainment of groups of vulnerable pupils or those from ethnic minority backgrounds, but there is more work to do. It has plans to develop the capacity of its pupil-level database, to target resources and further improve target setting for pupils in all groups.

19. OFSTED inspections over the last six years have confirmed this average performance, with some variation, in all types of schools. Primary schools, for example, fared better in terms of the quality of education than statistical neighbours and all schools, but less well in relation to management and efficiency. Secondary schools were much further ahead of the national picture, but close to statistical neighbours, in terms of standards and climate. The quality of education in secondary schools fell just below that for all schools and well below that for statistical neighbours. Management and efficiency were slightly ahead of the national picture, but behind statistical neighbours by the same amount.

20. OFSTED inspectors found standards much better in the high schools than in the middle schools. In the first cycle of inspections, secondary schools were ahead of statistical neighbours for management and efficiency and well ahead of all schools, whereas middle schools fared less well than statistical neighbours and all schools. The most recent inspections have shown an improvement in this respect, with middle schools now close to statistical neighbours and ahead of all schools. The LEA has paid serious attention to the relative attainment at 16 of pupils from the two- and three-tier systems. The statistics show no discernible difference in the attainment of the pupils.

21. The rate of permanent exclusions from schools is below the national average. Attendance rates are slightly above average for primary and secondary schools.

Funding

22. In the two financial years since it became a separate authority, Worcestershire County Council has budgeted to spend very close to the level of its Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) on education. The LEA prioritises spending on under fives and spends less on post-16 education than most LEAs. Worcestershire has a

local schools budget of £2,404 per pupil which is below the average for County Councils (£2,515) and for English LEAs (£2,598).

23. Capital spending in Worcestershire is projected to increase in 1999/00. Allocations are fully passed on to education and spending criteria are clearly articulated. The capital programme is closely monitored by the Chief Officers Management Board to prevent underspending.

24. The LEA generates considerable income from external sources: £5 million from the Standards Fund and £16 million from other sources. Schools agreed to the LEA retaining matched funding for Standards Fund grants centrally in 1999/00 to maximise income to delegate to schools.

25. In the current year, the LEA has delegated a slightly lower proportion of its Local Schools Budget (LSB) to schools (81 per cent) compared with other County Councils (83 per cent) and England as a whole (82 per cent). Few services are currently offered to schools on a buy-back basis: only £226,000 is projected to be bought back by schools in the current year, mainly for IT services and for personnel and payroll services by former GM schools. This is a reasonable picture, given the stage of development of this new LEA. Delegation is planned to be considerably increased in 2000/01 with delegation of many management support services and some SEN funding on an earmarked basis.

26. The major areas of retained funding are SEN (6.5 per cent of the LSB) and access (6.2 per cent of LSB). The LEA spends more than similar LEAs on special education, non-devolved specific grants and on 'other strategic management'. High spending areas are insurance and school-specific contingencies, as well as existing early retirement costs inherited from the previous authority. Although home to school transport costs are high, overall spending on access is low because the LEA only provides meals in special schools and a sandwich meal for pupils eligible for free school meals, a position inherited from the previous authority.

27. The inherited total special school Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB) and central expenditure on SEN provision for statemented pupils in mainstream schools were higher than nationally and in similar LEAs in 1998/99. Spending on additional special needs within the mainstream ASB, however, was relatively low. The LEA reduced the historically high special schools ASB in 1999/00 by limiting the high number of planned places. It also intends to delegate support for statemented pupils to schools so that resource allocations are the same, whatever the setting. In 1999/00 the bulk of spending on support for pupils with statements is on non-teaching support for pupils in mainstream schools, the Service for Children with Sensory Impairments and the Learning Behaviour Support Service (LBSS).

28. The inherited LMS formula was cumbersome, but has been simplified for 1999/00. In 1998/99, the proportion of school funding that was pupil-led was above national average at 89 per cent. The 1998/99 allocations contained relatively high levels of additional funding for small schools, especially in the primary sector, together with relatively low levels of premises-related funding, especially in the secondary sector. These issues were addressed in revisions to the funding formula prior to the start of the 1999/2000 financial year. The LEA is currently embarking on

a 'root and branch' review of the LMS formula with the help of a working group of headteachers, using an activity- and curriculum-based model. Schools welcome this review and the opportunity to be involved through the working group.

Council Structure

29. The Council has 57 Members (25 Conservative, 22 Labour, eight Liberal Democrat and two non-aligned). Leadership of the Council is currently reliant on a partnership of the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. Educational Services is one of five committees. A Children sub-committee is run jointly with the Social Services committee. This traditional approach works satisfactorily and Members of the Educational Services Committee collaborate well towards common goals. There has been some discussion, although with no consensus, about the introduction of an executive model. The Council has satisfactory structures for evaluation. Within the Educational Services department, the Monitoring Sub-Committee receives quarterly reports from officers. These have succeeded in raising the level of discussion amongst Members about standards. There is also an impressive level of dialogue between senior officers and Members through planned informal meetings.

The Education Development Plan

30. The Education Development Plan (EDP) identifies eight priorities, determined as a result of an extensive consultation process which involved schools and a range of partners. The eight priorities are:-

- Raising achievement in English and literacy for all pupils;
- Raising achievement in mathematics and numeracy for all pupils;
- Raising achievement in IT for all pupils;
- Raising achievement in the arts;
- Raising achievement across the curriculum in key stages 3 and 4;
- Improving the quality of teaching and learning;
- Improving the quality of school leadership and management;
- Raising achievement by extending learning opportunities.

31. The plan addresses national priorities, but also includes a local flavour, through Priority 4 (raising achievement in the arts). Although there is a degree of overlap in the areas addressed, particularly the last four, the different activities which define the priorities, show only a small amount of duplication. The priorities are clear and most are well-focused on improving attainment. Priority 4, as articulated, is too concerned with provision and insufficiently targeted on standards. Priority 8 brings together a number of important developments in relation to social inclusion, including the provision for vulnerable and disaffected pupils, vocational initiatives, early years initiatives, study support, and Personal, Social and Health Education provision.

32. The plan is well-structured; a distinctive strength is the identification of two "strands" which cut across the priorities, relating to support for pupils with SEN (including more able pupils) and to LEA intervention. These bring a measure of coherence to the plan overall and neatly build in key objectives for the service. Identifying the relevance of ICT to specific activities within priorities further enhances the plan, but this is not always made explicit in the description of those activities.

33. Much of the EDP is based on a thorough audit of need, but there are some gaps. National Curriculum and GCSE attainment were considered in detail as was evidence from OFSTED inspection reports and the LEA's own monitoring of schools and analysis of performance data. At the time of writing the EDP, however, there was no analysis of the attainment of pupils from ethnic minorities. The LEA, in common with others, had no knowledge of the pattern of National Curriculum attainment for Priority 3, ICT, which relies mainly on the findings of OFSTED inspections and LEA monitoring.

34. Strategic objectives are clearly articulated. Overall the plan is a feasible one, in that resources are well matched to the proposed activities. Outcome targets are challenging and clear, but some lack specificity. For example, Priority 8 includes attendance and exclusion targets but also all schools to have "effective policies for PSHE" and "improved provision for SEN pupils". The specificity of success criteria for each activity similarly varies. Explicit and appropriate links are made to other plans, especially the Corporate Plan, the Strategic Service Development Plan (SSDP), the Behaviour Support Plan, the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) bid and the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan.

35. There is a clear and appropriate strategy for monitoring the plan. Each priority, as well as the two cross-priority strands, has a member of the inspectorate assigned as manager, supported by a member of the Quality Division Management Team (QDMT). Monthly reports on progress are made to the QDMT. Contact inspectors' visits are recorded in a database which allows time spent to be monitored by priority or by school and related to linked notes of visit. Schools have the opportunity, through their contact inspector, to contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of the EDP, as well as considering the relationship of their own development plans to it.

36. Consultation on the EDP was rated between good and satisfactory in the School Survey and this was confirmed in discussions with headteachers. In the schools visited, all headteachers were aware of the plan and there was unanimous approval of its contents. They felt they had been able to influence the LEA's thinking during consultation. Match between existing School Development Plans (SDPs) and the EDP was generally good, an audit of SDPs having provided important background to the EDP.

The Allocation of Resources to Priorities

37. The LEA appropriately aims to integrate policy and budget planning through the Best Value process. Resources are mostly well-targeted on priorities, but the level of support to which all schools are entitled is too generous to enable the sensible discharge of duties by the Quality Division. The LEA's SSDP includes, as a priority, the review of the deployment of resources to schools and central departments as well as the maximising of external funding for educational improvement initiatives. Good progress has been made in this area, with an in-depth review, involving schools, of the funding formula and a review of the SEN-related services.

38. Worcestershire has made an early start on implementing Best Value, although it is not a pilot authority. Reviews are planned or in process for many areas, for

example personnel and payroll, and the Education Services department has appointed an associate headteacher to work on Best Value. Although incomplete, these reviews, carried out by external organisations, are beginning to provide information which allows the LEA to compare the costs of its services with those in other LEAs and the private sector. This represents a satisfactory start. Although most central recharges to the education budget are not based on Service Level Agreements (SLAs), they are not generally excessive. These will be closely examined in relation to the additional delegation in April 2000.

Recommendations

In order to make EDP targets and success criteria more measurable:-

planning should focus more clearly, where possible, on outcomes; consideration should be given to the essential features of improved practice and the performance indicators which would illustrate these.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

39. The EDP is the main focus for school improvement and is evaluated in paragraphs 30 to 36. Standards in schools also benefit from effective SEN provision, and from the LEA's generally well-focused support for improving behaviour and attendance at school. Moreover, through the provision, at low cost, of good or very good management support services, the LEA enables senior management in schools to concentrate on the key task of raising attainment.

40. The Quality Division is central to school improvement in the authority and its services are offered through a SLA. The division is built around three area teams, each headed by a senior inspector and involving between three and five others, as well as Members of other support services, including Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and LBSS. Costs per pupil are relatively low but effectiveness is achieved through heavy workloads. All inspectors have a subject or phase role in addition to being contact inspector for as many as 40 schools. Funding for EDP-related work is retained centrally and other support takes the form of traded services. The range of schools' core entitlement to inspector support is too wide; this dissipates the work of the service and does little to promote school autonomy.

41. In addition to the 17 inspectors and 16.4 teacher advisers managed by the Chief Inspector and two principals, individual teachers or headteachers are brought into the service as associates to address particular issues or to fill gaps in expertise. Three quarters of these have been seconded from County schools. For example the headteacher of a high school is leading on 16-19 work and a deputy head on GNVQ, while a geography teacher is undertaking part-time advisory work. As well as meeting particular needs within the service, this provides good professional development for the individuals concerned.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

42. The LEA maintains an appropriately light-touch approach to monitoring. Concerns raised by contact inspectors and others are raised at area meetings and possible courses of action explored. The LEA has a clear and explicit strategy for intervention, where the need for this is identified. The strengths of the support for such schools in this respect outweigh the occasional weaknesses. Contact inspectors' views of the quality of school management have been quantified and this informs the area teams' consideration of placing schools into one of four clearly defined categories of concern. Where required, subject or phase expertise is made available to the school. The strength of this system is that it enables a speedy response to early signs of weakness. Few schools have been identified by OFSTED as needing special measures or having serious weaknesses. The level and nature of intervention is well attuned to the specific needs of the school.

43. All schools have a contact inspector who has access to a range of statistical data which indicates the progress of cohorts moving between key stages. Contact

visits also monitor staff turnover, the quality of teaching, SEN provision and pupils' behaviour. Schools generally value their contact inspector, but there is a need for them to raise their level of challenge to schools. Although the target setting round last year was early in the life of the LEA, there were signs that inspectors had not developed sufficiently a culture of challenge. There were, for example, schools which greatly exceeded their Key Stage 2 targets for literacy and numeracy in 1999, while written evaluations for headteachers following reviews sometimes fail to stimulate a clear and appropriate level of challenge.

44. In addition to a named contact inspector, each school is entitled to a wide range of other support. The breadth and level of this entitlement for all schools means the LEA is not adequately targeting its resources in inverse proportion to success. Combined with an insufficiently developed approach to school self-review, this has led, in some schools, to the continuation of a dependency culture. In some of the schools visited, headteachers were unclear about their entitlement and there was a sense of the LEA being too ready to meet all identified needs. This is somewhat out of tune with the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations. The level of centrally funded support provided to all schools needs to be reviewed and provision more carefully targeted to need. This problem manifests itself in the LEA's implementation of the literacy strategy. The decision to support all primary schools has affected the quantity, and therefore the quality, of assistance given to those schools in need of intensive support. This has not, however, been the case in the numeracy strategy where support has been more focused on those schools needing intensive support.

45. Models for school self-review have been in place for some time, in this and the previous authority, and there are plans for further work against the OFSTED Framework. Overall progress to date, however, has been too slow and schools are generally less well advanced in this respect than in many authorities. Senior officers acknowledge this situation, have developed new models of self-review and are planning further work against the OFSTED Framework. There is a need to complement this by considering, in broad terms, how officers and advisers engage with schools in helping them towards a culture of more effective self-evaluation.

46. Detailed information about contact with schools is recorded in a database. This enables close quantitative analysis of time spent by EDP priority, school, area and inspector or teacher adviser. The evaluation of quality is undertaken by a range of methods, including Best Value reviews, course evaluations, headteacher focus groups, SWOT analyses, feedback from individual heads and governors, discussions at the Director's Development Group meetings and partnership meetings held with primary heads. These various evaluations would benefit from being brought together into a single evaluative report. There are well-developed systems for the induction of new inspectors and for their appraisal and professional development.

47. The clarity of the LEA's strategy for school improvement was rated as good in the school survey by both primary and secondary schools. LEA priorities were seen as relevant to the schools. The LEA's knowledge and understanding of the school were rated between good and satisfactory. The usefulness of monitoring was also rated between good and satisfactory as were support for the headteacher and subject leaders, and support for school self-evaluation, planning and target setting.

48. Our view, however, is that, while the quality of much of the inspectorate's work is good, it is neither realistic nor appropriate for schools to continue to have such a high level of support on tap. In many respects, the Quality Division is a strong service that is well led and managed. Phase and subject specialisms are maintained and the prime responsibility for school effectiveness and intervention is appropriately devolved to area teams. There is a need now to harness these strengths more effectively by ensuring that support is deployed more clearly to areas of greatest need.

Collection and Analysis of Data

49. The collection, analysis and use of data to assess the performance of schools and to help set targets, are rightly regarded as key areas for development by the authority. It has made good progress in developing the data it provides for schools, and has undertaken extensive and detailed analysis of this data in order to support schools in setting targets. The Early Years Profile relates information on current levels of development and pre-school experience to desirable learning outcomes and has been designed for use as a diagnostic tool for individual pupils. Analysis of this information is already providing the LEA with helpful information that could be used more widely, for example in considering with schools the differences in attainment between boys and girls. A pilot project is underway to investigate how such information can be linked to target setting in Key Stage 1 and to facilitate value-added analyses.

50. High schools receive valuable additional data from the authority, especially now that detailed information is available on attainment in subjects. In schools working with primary-aged pupils there were mixed views about the value of the LEA guidance in supporting target setting. This reflects the need for the authority to ensure that all headteachers understand the data they receive and the power of the analysis to help them set targets. In a number of schools, targets set were insufficiently challenging. Some schools rightly had concerns about the lack of information on the attainment of particular groups of pupils, for example those who are highly mobile or those with English as an additional language (EAL).

Support for Literacy

51. Performance in English has largely been in line with national averages. However, the LEA's own analysis that it should be achieving higher levels of attainment is correct. Its target of 82 per cent of pupils achieving Level 4 and above by 2002, is only slightly above the national target of 80 per cent. Provisional Key Stage 2 results for 1999 indicated that the authority is on line to achieve that target. This should not, however, mask the need to be more rigorous and challenging in setting this year's targets with individual schools, and officers recognise this.

52. Much of the work of the consultants is beginning to lift the schools needing most help. Schools in receipt of intensive support from the consultants saw an average improvement of nearly six per cent in their results this year. Some schools, however, needed more detailed and practical support that focused very clearly on teaching and learning. In spreading support too widely, the LEA has not always

been able to meet these needs. Some visits by consultants were too short to be helpful.

53. The initial training was effective in providing schools with a familiarity with the strategy and in helping co-ordinators to train their own staff. Some schools in receipt of intensive support, however, were not clear about procedures, entitlements and responsibilities. Schools with Key Stage 3 pupils have been well supported by the authority; particularly effective training has been undertaken with heads of English.

54. Lesson observations of the literacy hour by HMI show that teachers need further support in teaching guided reading and writing, in the more effective use of classroom assistants, and in stretching the most able pupils. The teaching of phonics and spelling is variable, as is the case nationally. Headteachers have been given too little support in monitoring the impact of the strategy and in using data to determine priorities to address weaknesses. Headteachers of small schools need more focused support, given their dual role in both teaching and managing the strategy.

Support for Numeracy

55. Performance in mathematics is in line with the national average at all key stages, and improving. This year's Key Stage 2 results show an increase in attainment of 11 per cent at level 4 and above, slightly above the national average increase. Such an improvement keeps it on track to meet its target of 77 per cent by 2002. This year's results suggest that the authority should raise the level of challenge in some schools.

56. The numeracy team has already demonstrated its ability to operate effectively at both a strategic and an operational level. Clear action plans for the implementation of the strategy are in place and working well so far. Good use has been made of the lessons learned from last year's pilot. Training was lively and effective. Support is mainly targeted at the first cohort of intensive schools and is varied to address the differences in attainment between primary and middle schools. The needs of schools working with EAL pupils have only recently been addressed.

57. Lesson observations by HMI confirm this picture: teachers have responded readily to the strategy; lessons often have a strong focus on direct teaching, and more effective strategies for mental mathematics. The consultants have worked effectively with teachers.

Support for ICT

58. The LEA's targets for raising attainment in ICT place insufficient emphasis on standards in key stages 1 to 3. In common with other authorities, the LEA currently holds no data on the attainment of 7 and 14 year olds with regard to IT capability and this is a weakness. Actions within the priority are clear and appropriate, but success criteria are too concerned with provision.

59. In the school survey, secondary schools rated support for the use of ICT in the curriculum and the introduction of NGfL significantly higher than in other LEAs. Primary schools rated these as satisfactory, but just below the LEA average. The inspection, including the evidence from schools visited, confirmed support as satisfactory, but with some variation. There remains much to do in raising levels of attainment across the full range of IT capability.

60. NGfL is managed by the ICT inspector and is progressing satisfactorily. The extra resources through the NGfL are giving schools the confidence to extend the learning both of staff and pupils. Technical problems persist, however, and are not always quickly resolved. Schools are not always sure to whom they should turn for different aspects of support. Two separate services, under the same manager, in corporate services provide technical ICT support to schools for curriculum resources and for school administration. While there is effective liaison between these services and the Quality Division, there is confusion in schools about the role of each service. The planned combination of these services should go some way towards addressing this issue.

Support for Schools Causing Concern

61. Worcestershire has had relatively few schools identified by OFSTED as needing special measures or having serious weaknesses. The authority inherited three schools in special measures and, since April 1998, one further school has entered that category. Ten schools have been identified as having serious weaknesses: two special schools, five primaries and three middle schools.

62. This picture is, in part at least, due to the careful monitoring undertaken by inspectors, which provides an effective early warning system. Contact inspectors are central to this. During their visits to schools, concerns may be identified across a broad area, including:-

- standards from end of key stage assessments;
- progress from value-added analysis of school and County data;
- progress in subjects from residual analysis and key stage data;
- exclusion and attendance figures from County data.

63. The contact inspectors, officers from the SEN and management services, and others, pass on any concerns about schools to the area teams who meet regularly to review each school. The director and other senior managers are directly involved in the progress of these schools, showing the high level of importance attached to this function by the senior management of the department.

64. Support for schools with special measures or serious weaknesses has been generally effective and the LEA is sensitive to the level of support needed. Schools visited in this category praised the LEA's good advice, for example on action planning, its staff INSET, and its lesson observations linked to the role of subject co-ordinators. There are occasional weaknesses, however, including insufficient emphasis on the school evaluating its own progress and more direct support in the production of effective school policies where this is needed.

65. The LEA has added two further categories of concern, based on its own monitoring, for schools that have had a formal warning from the director and those beginning to raise concerns. Area teams identify these, with the school's contact inspector central to the process. There are clear and explicit patterns of support for schools in each category. Inspectors work closely with headteachers and there is considerable monitoring in order to identify progress and support the school further.

Support for Governors

66. Support for governors is sound in all respects. Systems are in place to provide routine help, training, information and technical advice. Governors are consulted through termly meetings with the executive of the Worcestershire Association of Governors and the LEA also makes use of feedback from courses and contact inspectors. Governors respond very favourably to the level of dialogue, the accessibility of senior officers and the speed of response to problems. The LEA acts promptly and effectively in emergencies and in response to calls for help.

Support for School Management

67. Professional development for senior managers, especially heads and deputies, includes supporting their involvement on national training programmes such as the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers. There are other opportunities available through the professional development programme, contributing to LEA initiatives and annual headteachers' conferences, but for experienced heads and deputies these are limited. The LEA also brokers access to external training courses for senior managers. Induction for new headteachers is effective; they have their own well-structured and targeted programme, including the opportunity for mentoring and a residential conference.

68. Appraisal is the other main vehicle for development and the authority has made efforts to continue to develop the process. Opinion in schools is divided about the usefulness and rigour of the current peer-appraisal model and a number of heads are piloting an alternative. The authority has been instrumental in reviewing the way forward and will be well placed to take action once the national regulations are published.

69. There is a range of support available to school management in the areas of curriculum and teaching. Contact inspectors provide the main link to the Quality Division for headteacher. These work mainly within their phase specialisms to ensure that headteachers have access to sufficient depth of management and curriculum experience. There remains confusion in some schools about the role of the contact inspector and the amount of time available for this. In practice, most headteachers feel able to get support whenever they need it, but for some inspectors the time commitment to this role appears excessive, especially when they have other major responsibilities. The majority of heads in the schools visited found contact inspectors provided good professional support.

70. Support for self-evaluation has been patchy and dependent on the individual school's wish and ability to be involved with it. A framework has been available to primary and middle schools for some time but there are few coherent systems currently in place. The LEA does have plans to improve this area, however, including training for schools in self-review against the OFSTED Framework.

71. Support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is available both through a planned programme of continuing professional development and the school's contact inspector. The majority of heads spoke very positively about the programme, and it was also valued by the NQTs.

Other areas

Support for the arts

72. Support for the arts is sound overall, although standards vary widely between schools. The LEA is committed to supporting the performing and visual arts through Priority 4 in the EDP and this has been warmly welcomed by headteachers. The arts advisory team is a cohesive group with the energy and determination to raise standards. There is good liaison with the County Cultural Services.

73. The EDP priority is couched in terms of the provision of experiences, rather than standards, and pays insufficient attention to the specific needs of class teachers, many of whom lack specialist expertise. There is already some good practice in the support mechanisms provided for the arts, and this needs to be disseminated to the whole of the team.

74. Strategic planning for the arts is overseen by an advisory group comprising headteachers, officers, inspectors and teachers. The programme of support was drawn up following an audit based on 300 school visits. There is a need now for this audit to inform the future planning of the support team so that its impact can be fully realised in schools, meet the needs of teachers and concentrate on standards.

Support for more able pupils

75. The LEA has a commitment to developing the needs of more able pupils. Schools have access to sound LEA policy documents and there are regular opportunities for more able pupils to take part in centrally organised workshops and other curriculum projects. These sessions are organised by a small team of part-time teacher advisers, led by a senior inspector. There are also specific projects in curriculum areas such as IT and Science. The work has impacted on the limited number of children who are currently identified for support, but there is still much to be done in disseminating practice and in widening the definition of "more able".

Recommendations

In order to improve support for school improvement:-

- (i) the level of support to which schools are entitled should be reviewed to ensure greater focus on developing school autonomy and the planned training for school self-review should be accelerated;
- (ii) the approach to support and challenge should be reviewed to raise the level of challenge to all schools and to target inspection and advisory support more closely onto those schools identified as needing it most;
- (iii) existing performance data should be further used to analyse the attainment patterns of particular groups of pupils, to allocate resources accordingly, and to develop targets for pupils who are vulnerable and those with EAL;
- (iv) more attention should be given to the specific support and identified resources needed for schools working with minority groups such as Travellers or pupils with EAL;
- (v) the arts team should plan to provide more in-class support in primary schools to develop the confidence and competence of non-specialist teachers;
- (vi) planning for ICT should be informed by patterns of attainment across key stages and schools should be provided with a clear description of how the ICT strategy is managed and the role of, and access to, the different services involved.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning

76. Worcestershire LEA has developed, in its short lifetime, a corporate ethos which is strong in many respects. The Corporate Plan, "Climbing the Ladder to Success" sets out a broad but clear vision and recognises the need to work with a range of partners and to listen to local communities. Six broad priorities were identified after consultation in April and May 1998:-

- community involvement and community services;
- lifetime learning, including raising the skills and education standards, offering opportunities for personal development to all age groups, and matching skills to employers' needs;
- improving economic and social well-being, including the reduction of poverty and social exclusion;
- making Worcestershire a better place to live;
- building the new County Council;
- sustainability.

77. This is a coherent and feasible document, strengthened by its explicit links with the Service Delivery Plans for directorates which clearly stem from it. Links between other departments and Education Services, however, are not always clear in these plans and this is the main weakness at present. Key aims are identified for each priority and targets are set for each key aim.

78. The broad principles of community involvement and consultation were clearly perceived by headteachers in the schools visited, who felt that the LEA's broad intentions of openness, accountability and transparency were being met. Cross-directorate working, however, especially between Educational Services and Social services, was not always evident to schools.

79. The implementation of the plan relies on the effective Chief Officers Management Board which meets to discuss corporate issues. Each directorate evaluates its own service plan and regularly provides well-focused reports to its service committee. The Policy Development and Performance Review Committee is the central Council focus for evaluation and monitors the reports within each directorate. Elected Members are very involved in strategic planning within the Council as a whole and within directorates. They were integral to the formulation of the Corporate Plan and take a keen interest in its progress. They provide a sound level of leadership on policy to the department and have developed constructive and effective relationships with senior officers.

80. The transfer from Hereford and Worcester was effectively handled. The finance function has been unified, with finance officers outposted to departments and reporting to the director of finance. Financial management is devolved to chief officers and to heads of services with considerable freedom to vary spending within policy parameters. Decision-making is open and effective. Senior officers, working closely with elected Members, have provided good leadership in setting appropriate aims for the new authority and in ensuring that these imbue all areas of the Council's

work. The small education management team is integral to the evaluation of development plans and to the strategy for supporting school improvement. Advice to elected Members is clear and informative. There is a strong emphasis on working in partnership with other agencies.

81. The Strategic Service Development Plan (SSDP) for Education Services is in line with the Service Plans from the other directorates and has an explicit link to the corporate development plan. Five Education Service Pledges are stated:

- promote learning and increased achievement;
- provide support for SEN;
- secure Equal Opportunities and access to educational services;
- provide high quality learning entitlement in the Early Years;
- promote lifelong learning and community development.

These are consistent with the corporate plan and there are clear links with the EDP both in its structure and, explicitly, in specific activities. The corporate priorities are reflected within the SSDP and each priority is explicitly linked to the relevant corporate priorities. The LEA's working practices are generally in line with these pledges, although attention to the attainment of pupils from ethnic minorities has only recently started to address equality of opportunity and access for these pupils.

82. There are 21 priorities in the SSDP, although, in practice, those not included in the EDP define the LEA's remaining areas of current structural and organisational change including:- funding, school places, transport, student awards, capital projects, the Youth Service and Lifelong Learning provision. There is less detail here than in the EDP. Targets are clearly stated but, again, are sometimes focused too much on provision and insufficiently on outcomes.

83. The LEA has worked hard to develop genuine partnerships with other organisations. Representatives of these groups appreciated close working relationships with senior officers as part of the school improvement agenda. The LEA has recognised the link between school improvement, the labour market and lifelong learning and officers have forged constructive links with other bodies in order to pursue the aims of the corporate plan. An example of effective, co-ordinated action is the Lifelong Learning Plan, where the authority has worked with the Chamber of Commerce, Careers Company, the Employment Service, Further and Higher Education providers, as well as schools, to target areas of social need through extending support for individual pupils.

84. The detailed Early Years Development and Childcare Plan (EYDCP) demonstrates the importance the authority places on achieving its aims by working closely with all providers and other partners who have an interest. This constructive and productive partnership has already had an impact on the quality of provision for under fives. Mentor teachers, appointed by the authority to serve the Early Years Partnership, have visited settings where there are four year olds and have shared good practice and provided support for planning and assessment. The principles of the Effective Early Learning Project, undertaken last year, are being systematically shared through in-service courses.

85. Although relationships with the new diocesan representatives are good, they are not adequately involved in strategic planning. The teacher associations, while generally positive about the new LEA, had justified concerns about the long delay in convening one of the main consultative groups. The LEA welcomes the involvement of the associations in consultations on strategic issues, but these do not always address their needs for more detailed discussion on specific issues.

Schools Infrastructure

86. The LEA provides good and often excellent management services to schools. Planning is effective, costs are carefully monitored, and officers have a good knowledge of the needs of schools, make frequent visits and provide helpful and valid advice. However, the LEA's late start in implementing a County-wide ICT strategy means that sections are often poorly-served by their IT systems and schools are using a variety of different systems. The school survey responses and the school visits confirmed that Human Resources and Property Services are most highly valued by schools, followed closely by financial support. Though most schools were positive, a minority were critical of the support for IT in administration. Early information on costs suggests that LEA services in general offer good value for money. Only the IT service is currently delegated to schools. In other areas the LEA should plan the delegation of expenditure and the costs of traded services carefully and keep the costs to schools, particularly small schools, within reason.

87. Links with the corporately managed services work well and headteachers value the services' close links with the schools and their good knowledge of them. Most of the services are currently not delegated to schools, although most former Grant Maintained schools buy personnel and payroll services from the LEA. Human Resources services (including Health and Safety), payroll services, financial services, property advice and advice for catering, caretaking and grounds maintenance services will be delegated from April 2000. In preparation for this, draft SLAs are currently being drawn up for these services and the LEA is rightly using external reviews, as part of the Best Value process, to provide comparative cost information.

88. The small Human Resources (HR) team is well-organised and accessible to schools, with a Duty Officer scheme to give expert advice by phone, a link officer for each of the area teams and visits to brief all new headteachers. The service is customer-oriented and has used the results of surveys to inform its planning. Service planning is effective and well integrated, but the lack of a coherent HR IT system across the Council has led to a dearth of good management information. A new system is under implementation.

89. The small Education Finance team provides clear, timely and useful information on school budgets, particularly the projected staffing costs. There is an appropriately high level of support on budget setting to headteachers who needed it, primarily new heads or those with deficits. Budget simulations are rapidly produced and formal benchmarking information packs have been provided for all schools, together with planned training in their use for primary headteachers. Schools visited confirmed

that the service is responsive, prompt and efficient, with staff having a good understanding of schools.

90. The Property Services team in Corporate Services provides the technical property service to schools. The new Planning and Accommodation Unit in Education discharges the client function in relation to the capital programme, and for caretaking, catering, cleaning and grounds maintenance. It liaises closely with property services over preparation of the Asset Management Plan. The role of forecasting pupil numbers has recently been transferred to the unit as part of the asset management planning process. The property service is well regarded by schools and is well organised, planned and prioritised.

91. Before 1999/2000 the service carried out quinquennial condition surveys, using these to inform a rolling maintenance programme. All revenue maintenance funding was delegated to schools in 1998/99. Good support has been offered to schools to help them with their new responsibilities. Shortage of funding in the past has meant that there is a considerable backlog of repairs and many schools feel they now have insufficient delegated funding to cope with these.

92. Schools were positive about the property and maintenance services in the schools survey. In particular they rated the implementation of building condition and suitability surveys and technical advice about schools' responsibility for building maintenance higher than schools in the other 17 LEAs surveyed. Most schools visited had close relationships with their area property officers over a long period and all appreciated the annual monitoring visit provided. The schools involved reported the management of capital projects as excellent.

93. The LEA is currently developing a County-wide strategy for ICT support, though this is separate from the curriculum IT strategy to support its NGfL bid. The development of central IT systems was delayed by LGR and some services have systems which are not fit for purpose. Plans are coherent: the proposed management information system is compatible with the pupil-level database and the electronic transfer of data to schools.

94. ICT support for the department and schools is currently provided by two teams, managed by Education Services and located in the Corporate Services Directorate. Management Information Systems(MIS) provides technical support and training to schools for ICT in administration. Classroom Systems Support (CSS) provides support for ICT in the classroom, including NGfL. Both are currently offered as SLAs. The MIS and CSS staff carry out customer support visits to schools and did a telephone survey of a third of schools in May 1999, followed by a survey questionnaire. The support for ICT in administration was recently reviewed externally and judged to give good value for money. Software support to schools is variable and this was confirmed by the comments made by headteachers, some of who found the LEA service to be slow and understaffed. The range of different support teams is also unhelpful to schools, who are unclear about whom to contact.

Recommendations

In order to further strengthen strategic planning:-

- (i) more explicit links should be made between the Service Delivery plans of other directorates and that of Educational Services;
- (ii) steps should be taken to ensure that the new diocesan representatives are more involved in strategic planning at a sufficiently early stage in the development of policies.

In order to base delegated funds and costs of Service Level Agreements for traded services on actual costs:-

the levels of central recharges for the services to be delegated should be examined alongside activity analyses.

In order to provide the necessary support for the traded services:-

the information systems and use of ICT within the LEA, including LEA/school links, should be reviewed as part of the development of the County ICT strategy.

In order to standardise the administrative IT systems in schools:-

an audit of hardware and software for administration in all schools should be carried out, and any inconsistencies identified and addressed.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

95. The provision of special educational needs (SEN) is satisfactory, and in many aspects good. Its strength is in its quality rather than quantity, and current developments show that it is on track to improve further. The LEA has a convincing strategy for SEN provision, which is carefully interwoven into the eight priorities of its EDP.

96. The LEA allocates SEN funds appropriately, but does not always make the rationale for this clear to schools. Savings have been made recently in a creative way, for example by replacing the taxi service for pupils attending PRUs with a minibus service operated by Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and by reducing the number of out of County placements in special schools. Schools are generally aware of the financial constraints under which the LEA operates and accept that limits to SEN provision have to be set. Both the school survey and the school visits showed that headteachers are, in the main, satisfied with the quality of provision and support.

Statutory Obligations

97. Policies have been developed with a clear recognition of the LEA's statutory duties as enshrined in the SEN Code of Practice, but also as required in a more general sense via duties relating, for example, to literacy, numeracy and social inclusion. A special needs development plan for 1999/2000 with appropriate objectives has been drawn up by senior staff in education in consultation and active partnership with staff in other services and organisations. This takes into account the current range of statutorily required plans, such as that for early years and childcare.

98. The County processes a significantly higher proportion of its statements of SEN in the required time than the average for all County Councils. Although medically-related statements are satisfactory and other statements have become more useful to schools in recent years, there is still a need to improve the specificity of the expected outcomes in some statements in order to inform more closely the development of suitable teaching programmes.

Improvement and Value for Money

99. The LEA has paid considerable attention to helping schools to improve teaching and to raising the attainment of pupils. For example, the NLS is being effectively implemented in special schools recently inspected, with particular improvements in teaching methods, resources, and the use of target setting to focus attention on attainment. The Learning Behaviour Support Service (LBSS) offers a range of effective services to improve teaching, including that of SEN pupils in mainstream schools and is well regarded by schools. The work of the Pupil Referral Units

(PRUs) has been successfully reoriented towards preventative work in mainstream schools and the reintegration of excluded pupils back into schools.

100. More specifically, able autistic pupils are now well provided for in two mainstream schools with appropriately resourced bases, a feature with which parents are rightly impressed. The SEN inspector is also having a clear impact in schools, not least in helping them to set more sharply focused targets for individual pupils and to plan for their achievement. Given the effectiveness of support and the overall level of expenditure, the SEN services provide good value for money.

Analysis

101. Senior management of SEN is rightly seen by schools as determined, fair, hard working and effective. Problems taken by schools to officers are dealt with efficiently. SEN-related services and teams are working well together and liaison with other services, particularly the Council's social services and the local Health Authority and Trusts, is productive. Consultation procedures are well developed and there are promising initiatives to improve communications and support, for example by publishing information leaflets and nominating befrienders to help parents of pupils who are being statemented. Co-ordinated planning and practice are clearly evident as is the attention paid at various levels of the department to the evaluation of services.

102. The management of SEN has developed in the recent past through a series of specific reviews and subsequent drives for improvement. Through such a review, an integrated LBSS has been created to rationalise and strengthen a range of support. The LBSS is well managed, clear about its objectives and very attentive to providing detailed support for schools. The combined service is a sensible arrangement. Further benefits are likely to emerge from the joint visits to schools with educational psychologists; following these visits, schools will need a written indication of how each service will be of help.

103. The LBSS provides assessment at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice, training for teachers, a resources loan service and assistance on request. The quality of much of this support is good, reflecting in part the determination of the LEA to enable staff in the service to develop specialisms on which they can advise with authority. Similarly, incorporating the Looked After Children support team into the LBSS helps focus attention quite rightly on the educational needs of children who are looked after. Overall, the LBSS is well placed to assist the LEA to implement its social inclusion intentions.

104. The Service for Children with Sensory Impairment is well organised and well oriented towards the needs of children and their parents. Where schools made use of this service they were impressed with its effectiveness.

105. The EPS, until recently beset by staffing problems, has been reorganised and enlarged to improve the coherence and speed of its services to schools. The inherited problems led many schools to be critical of the service. Schools visited complained mainly of the insufficiency of the time available to do a professional job.

There is much still to be done here to give the schools the consistency of service they deserve.

Recommendations

In order to improve the support for the teaching of pupils with SEN:-

- (i) steps should be taken to ensure that statements are more specific about expected outcomes;
- (ii) following the joint visits to schools of Members of the EPS and LBSS, it should be made clear to schools, in writing, in what way each service will be of help;
- (iii) the analysis of work in schools should be extended to investigate how schools meet statutory requirements and meet the needs of pupils with statements in mainstream schools;
- (iv) the re-structuring of the EPS should be embedded in the full range of special needs provision to ensure a consistency of service for schools.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The Supply of School Places

106. The LEA meets statutory requirements in this area. Where there are weaknesses, the LEA is addressing them. As indicated in section 1, the authority inherited a very mixed pattern of schooling with a wide variety of transfer ages. There is a need to rationalise this overall picture and the LEA should develop, as soon as possible, clear proposals for consultation on how they intend to address this problem.

107. The authority has complied with legislation by producing a School Organisation Plan, approved by the School Organisation Committee and the Education Committee. Overall the LEA does not have excessive numbers of surplus places, although its School Organisation Plan identifies particular areas where there are surpluses and others where rolls are rising. It has shown itself determined to confront the issue of surplus places and should continue to address the needs of the areas where rolls are rising, through capital investment and planning with schools.

Admissions

108. The LEA produces a useful but necessarily complex handbook on admissions. This details catchment areas and levels of applications and offers for middle and high schools. Admissions criteria are based on catchment areas and sibling links, as in many mainly rural areas. The number of appeals increased significantly between September 1998 and September 1999, mainly for entry to middle or high schools and the LEA needs to do further work to investigate the reasons.

109. Home to school transport is generally well-managed in Worcestershire but, at over £7 million, it is a heavy drain on a tight budget. In order to reduce costs, the LEA reviewed its arrangements during 1998 and implemented a new policy in September 1999. This reduced the eligibility for free transport of a number of categories of pupils. Groups most affected by this were pupils attending denominational schools, particularly those in Catholic schools.

110. The consultation process, although comprehensive and adherent to the letter of the required timing, was, nevertheless, carried out in too much haste. The change in policy was not sufficiently clear to some parents before they chose secondary schools for their children. These shortcomings were not evident in other consultation exercises; they were largely due to a lack of forward planning early in the LEA's life and a desire on the part of officers and Members to address difficult issues head on.

Provision of Education Otherwise Than At School

111. Provision for pupils who have no school place is generally satisfactory, and is improving owing to a series of concerted efforts by the LEA and its partners. This is reflected in the school survey which shows a higher than average measure of satisfaction with provision for looked-after children, pupils excluded and those out of school for other reasons.

Attendance

112. Attendance levels are close to the national average in the primary schools and above average in secondary schools. The LEA discharges its duties in the promotion of attendance at school largely through the work of its education welfare service (EWS). The EWS is increasingly effective in helping schools to secure attendance and its reorganisation has contributed significantly to this. The school survey shows that headteachers are satisfied with the EWS, generally more so than in other LEAs recently surveyed. The school visits confirmed this picture of effectiveness and improvement.

Behaviour Support

113. Although the rates of excluding pupils from school are better at primary and secondary levels than national averages, the LEA is rightly concerned to bring them down further. In particular it has worked in a small number of schools, some of which are amongst the highest performing, where the rates of exclusion are high. The LEA aims to help schools improve their management of pupils' behaviour through better planning and staff training.

114. The EDP refers, in its priority 8, to the promotion of good behaviour in raising achievement. The Behaviour Support Plan is based on a survey of existing provision and consultation with a number of different stakeholders. It develops the links between improved behaviour and raising achievement. The aims of the plan are good and lead naturally to developments in prevention and early intervention, parent and community links, inclusion and curriculum access. However, some of the actions to be taken and the targets set lack specificity and need to be more sharply defined to inform work to improve procedures.

115. A draft strategy for dealing with exclusions sets out a sensible course of action, including early prevention, co-operation between services, reintegration of pupils and close monitoring, to meet the DfEE targets to reduce permanent exclusions from 121 to 84 by 2002. Exclusions have fallen in the last year and this improvement has been influenced by a number of useful actions including refocusing LBSS work in primary schools, better targeting of EPS work amongst pupils with SEN and better liaison between the EPS, school inspectors and the LBSS. New Start money has been invested in EBD schools and PRUs, in the latter case to enable them to concentrate more on reintegration. A detailed and informative manual of guidance on policy and practice in school exclusions was revised in August 1999.

Health, Safety, Welfare, Child Protection

116. Health and Safety support is effective. Schools are clear about their responsibilities, and provide up-to-date risk information for the LEA through a six-monthly survey. This is properly used to target support to those schools, which need it. Schools visited found the health and safety officer accessible and helpful, though his visits had become more targeted on risks revealed by the surveys. The training organised by the LEA had been effective and schools valued the handbook.

Looked-After Children

117. The new LEA has begun a drive to improve opportunities for looked-after children, in conjunction with health and social services. Early signs of success include outstripping by five percentage points a target of 50 per cent of these children achieving one or more GCSE passes.

118. Looked-after children are educated either in one of the County's PRUs or, less commonly, in mainstream schools. In both cases the pupils and staff are supported by a newly constituted Looked After Support Team which has been set up within the LBSS and which draws upon the expertise of social services as well as education staff. Locating this team within the LBSS encourages staff to focus on crucial developments in teaching and learning. A major effort to redirect the work of the PRUs towards improving attainment and reintegrating children back into mainstream schools is paying off, as was clearly seen in the school visits.

Ethnic Minority Children

119. Most of the support for Ethnic Minority pupils is targeted at EAL pupils in nurseries and Key Stage 1. The LEA does not support these pupils adequately thereafter as they continue through the school system. Value for money in the early years is good, but unsatisfactory later as standards of attainment remain depressed for this group of pupils, with the Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils remaining the lowest attaining groups at GCSE.

120. The LEA achieves very good value for money in relation to Traveller children. There are good networks established with the West Midlands Consortium Education Service for Travelling Children and good tracking of pupils as they move across County boundaries. Some good practice within the consortium is shared and teachers are well supported with advice and resources in schools.

121. The EMAG support provided for Nursery and Key Stage 1 pupils contributes significantly to school improvement. The pupils enter school often with no English at all and quickly acquire skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. There is some good support for the community, for example the Families Learning In Groups and Helping Together groups and also a project where Reception teachers work with families to develop childcare strategies. By the end of Key Stage 1 the pupils have made good progress, especially in speaking and listening where many have progressed through more than one level of a monitoring system devised by Hereford and Worcester. Their attainment however, is still below the national norms.

122. The LEA has produced a satisfactory draft action plan to run from autumn 1999 to raise the quality of multicultural and anti-racist work in Worcestershire schools. Draft guidance for schools on racial harassment states that Worcestershire LEA is committed to combating racism and acts of racial harassment and seeks to encourage a positive ethos that promotes racial justice and harmony. It gives sound guidance to schools in relation to the curriculum, ethos, the behaviour of staff and pupils, recognising incidents and suggested actions, supporting victims, dealing with perpetrators and recording and monitoring.

School Improvement

123. There are signs of improvement in pupil behaviour, through the reduction of exclusions during the LEA's first year of existence. Primary headteachers are more than satisfied with the LEA's support for improving pupils' behaviour and with alternative provision for excluded pupils. Secondary heads are also satisfied with support for improving behaviour and well satisfied with the appropriateness of advice on exclusion processes. The high level of satisfaction in schools is, in part, related to the LEA's creation of the integrated LBSS, charged to draw together strands of support. In the schools visited there was much evidence of the high quality of assistance offered by staff in this service, many of whom are now able to develop and apply specialist competencies.

124. A feature of the improved provision for looked-after children is that a record keeping system is being developed, including their attainment, which can be accessed jointly by education and social services officers. One of the tasks of the newly appointed social inclusion officer is to oversee the attainment of these pupils, which this system will enable, and to help schools further to improve their procedures for education of children looked after. In addition to this, a Primary Care and Support project, jointly overseen by education, health and social services, is usefully setting out to improve support, not just for the children but also to enable their carers better to contribute to their education.

125. As indicated above the authority needs to provide more effective support for pupils from ethnic minorities if they are to ensure the necessary improvement in the attainment of groups of these pupils after Key Stage 1.

Social Exclusion

126. The new Council has made a satisfactory start in addressing issues of social exclusion, although attention to the attainment of specific groups of pupils was too late arriving. A social inclusion officer has been appointed to co-ordinate developments and has already worked with senior officers, for example in plans for monitoring the attainment of vulnerable groups of pupils. The database of performance data has the capacity to be used to analyse and compare the attainment of different groups of pupils and plans are in place to do this.

127. The Council's commitment to these issues is illustrated by the replacement of the unsuccessful Education Action Zone bid with a smaller scale initiative, resourced internally. This will enable the LEA to build on existing initiatives; extra resources have already been targeted at areas of social need. Collaborative work with a range of partners, including the Health Authority and Trusts, West Mercia Police and local business, has been effectively harnessed towards this end. For example, a collaborative Early Excellence Centre proposal is targeted at disadvantaged areas of Worcester City and Kidderminster.

Recommendations

In order to make progress towards rationalising the ages of transfer:-

consultation should be undertaken on the authority's intention to standardise the ages of transfer in operation through future school re-organisations.

In order to raise the achievement of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds:-

- (i) appropriate funding should be allocated to support the needs of ethnic minority children and under-achieving groups as they progress beyond Key Stage 1;
- (ii) staff in schools should be made more aware of the LEA mechanisms to support the achievement of ethnic minorities.

In order to improve the behaviour of pupils:-

the Behaviour Support Plan should be further developed to define targets and actions more clearly.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

A In order to make EDP targets and success criteria more measurable:-

planning should focus more clearly, where possible, on outcomes; consideration should be given to the essential features of improved practice and the performance indicators which would illustrate these.

B In order to improve support for school improvement:-

- (i) the level of support to which schools are entitled should be reviewed to ensure greater focus on developing school autonomy and the planned training for school self-review should be accelerated;
- (ii) the approach to support and challenge should be reviewed to raise the level of challenge to all schools and to target inspection and advisory support more closely onto those schools identified as needing it most;
- (iii) existing performance data should be further used to analyse the attainment patterns of particular groups of pupils, to allocate resources accordingly, and to develop targets for pupils who are vulnerable and those with EAL;
- (iv) more attention should be given to the specific support and identified resources needed for schools working with minority groups such as Travellers or pupils with EAL;
- (v) the arts team should plan to provide more in-class support in primary schools to develop the confidence and competence of non-specialist teachers;
- (vi) planning for ICT should be informed by patterns of attainment across key stages and schools should be provided with a clear description of how the ICT strategy is managed and the role of and access to the different services involved.

C In order to further strengthen strategic planning:-

- (i) more explicit links should be made between the Service Delivery plans of other directorates and that of Educational Services;
- (ii) steps should be taken to ensure that the new diocesan representatives are more involved in strategic planning at a sufficiently early stage in the development of policies.

D In order to base delegated funds and costs of Service Level Agreements for traded services on actual costs:-

the levels of central recharges for the services to be delegated should be examined alongside activity analyses.

E In order to provide the necessary support for the traded services:-

the information systems and use of ICT within the LEA, including LEA/school links, should be reviewed as part of the development of the County ICT strategy.

F In order to standardise the administrative IT systems in schools:-

an audit of hardware and software for administration in all schools should be carried out, and any inconsistencies identified and addressed.

G In order to improve the support for the teaching of pupils with SEN:-

- (i) steps should be taken to ensure that statements are more specific about expected outcomes;
- (ii) following the joint visits to schools of Members of the EPS and LBSS, it should be made clear to schools, in writing, in what way each service will be of help;
- (iii) the analysis of work in schools should be extended to investigate how schools meet statutory requirements and meet the needs of pupils with statements in mainstream schools;
- (iv) the re-structuring of the EPS should be embedded in the full range of special needs provision to ensure a consistency of service for schools.

H In order to make progress towards rationalising the ages of transfer:-

consultation should be undertaken on the authority's intention to standardise the ages of transfer in operation through future school re-organisations.

I In order to raise the achievement of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds:-

- (i) appropriate funding should be allocated to support the needs of ethnic minority children and under-achieving groups as they progress beyond Key Stage 1;
- (ii) staff in schools should be made more aware of the LEA mechanisms to support the achievement of ethnic minorities.

J In order to improve the behaviour of pupils:-

the Behaviour Support Plan should be further developed to define targets and actions more clearly.

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