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IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection of Staffordshire local education authority (LEA) was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (December 2001)*. The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the LEA's work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on best value.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; and diocesan representatives. Other agencies and LEA partners participated in focus groups. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier OFSTED/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in 1996). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 414 schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 78 per cent.

COMMENTARY

3. Staffordshire County Council was established in its present form in 1997, following local government reorganisation. The authority, which is large by national standards, is mainly rural but with some sizeable towns and many smaller centres of population. The county has more features of social advantage than disadvantage. Its low level of funding compared to the majority of other LEAs is not such as to prevent the authority and its schools from carrying out their statutory functions, although it places them under considerable pressure. It is a persistent concern to schools and the LEA.

4. Overall, attainment is at least in line with the national average and often above both the national average and that of similar authorities.

5. The first inspection, in 1996, was a pilot one and did not cover all the functions of the LEA. At that time, Staffordshire LEA was judged to have more weaknesses than strengths. The opposite is now true. There is only one area of major weakness, special educational needs. Substantial improvements have been made in the support for school improvement and this is now a major strength. Sufficient progress has been made with the coherence and effectiveness of corporate and departmental plans and these are now satisfactory.

6. The LEA has many attributes which mark it out as effective. National strategies aimed at school improvement and raising standards of attainment are being implemented well. Relationships between the LEA and schools are good. Consultation is purposeful and there is a high level of trust. Schools have confidence in the LEA. The LEA promotes social and educational inclusion through its procedures and support for child protection and children in public care and its efforts to combat racism. The LEA has sound strategies in place to secure Best Value.

7. The following functions are particular strengths:

- the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools;
- the leadership and strategic planning of school improvement work together with the deployment and expertise of the staff involved in the work;
- the management and use of performance data;
- the identification of and support for under-performing schools;
- support for numeracy;
- support for the curriculum use of information and communication technology;
- support to schools for raising standards in Key Stage 3;
- the effectiveness of financial and human resource services;
- support for schools for information and communication technology in administration;
- catering;
- support for attendance;
- support for behaviour; and
- the quality of leadership provided by senior officers.

8. The following functions are not exercised adequately:

- support for school improvement in the area of special educational needs;
- the supply of school places;
- asset management planning; and
- property services.

9. Finally there are significant weaknesses in the following functions:

- the strategy for special educational needs;
- meeting statutory obligations in respect of special educational needs; and
- the value for money of the provision for special educational needs.

10. The hallmark of Staffordshire is evolutionary change, with an emphasis on the establishment of a consensus with schools and other partners. Only occasionally, as in the case of special educational needs, has this approach led to delays in recognising the moment when firm and radical action is needed.

11. At the time of the inspection, members of the senior management team had been in post for twelve months, although a number of senior officers, including the director, had been in the county, in other posts, at the time of the first inspection. The quality of leadership given by the senior management team is good. Furthermore, third tier officers have demonstrated an ability to initiate changes which support school improvement. Members, officers and schools recognise that the director has identified correctly the issues facing the LEA and support, in principle, her determination to come to grips with weaknesses in special educational needs. The management team recognise that improvement is required urgently. Despite the fact that there is much to be done before the LEA's emerging vision directly influences outcomes in special educational needs, the inspection team is confident that the LEA has the capacity to deal with its weaknesses and act on the recommendations made in this report.

Context

12. Staffordshire County Council was established in its present form in 1997, following local government reorganisation when Stoke-on-Trent became a unitary authority. The authority is large by national standards and serves a population of over 800,000. It is a largely rural authority, but with some sizeable towns and many smaller centres of population.

13. Overall the county has more features of advantage than disadvantage. Staffordshire ranks 104th out of 150 local authorities on the basis of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' index of multiple deprivation. As with nearly all authorities, there are some areas of social deprivation. Unemployment is below the regional and national level and the percentage of residents in social classes one and two is in line with that found nationally. Fewer than 14 per cent of primary pupils and 11 per cent of secondary pupils are eligible for free school meals, below the national averages of 19.7 per cent and 18.1 per cent respectively.

14. Despite a predicted rise in the population overall, the number of pupils in the primary age range is falling more rapidly than nationally and the number in the secondary age range is rising more slowly. The proportion of pupils of ethnic minority origin is low: 3.1 per cent compared to 12.1 per cent nationally.

15. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational need is high at 4.12 per cent. Although the majority of these pupils are taught in mainstream schools, the percentage of primary age pupils with statements of special educational needs taught in special schools, 1.5 per cent, is above the national figure of one per cent and that of the LEA's statistical neighbours, 0.9 per cent.¹

16. The LEA maintains 416 schools. There are 55 secondary schools, 14 middle schools, 312 first and primary schools, 23 special schools, eight nursery schools, one early years centre and three pupil referral units. Forty-seven of the secondary schools provide education for pupils between the ages of eleven and eighteen. Eight provide education for eleven to sixteen year olds and are linked to a tertiary college. A three-tier system operates in some rural areas. Over one hundred first and primary schools are small and have fewer than four teachers. Four secondary schools have been awarded specialist college status. There are ten Beacon schools, four of which are special schools. Five primary schools and five secondary schools were formerly grant maintained. Almost all pupils over the age of four attend full or part time education and thirty three per cent of three year olds attend pre-school provision.

Performance

17. Overall performance is at least in line with the national average, and often above both the national average and that found in similar authorities. Details are given below.

¹ Staffordshire's statistical neighbours are: Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Essex, Cheshire, Worcestershire, Lancashire, West Sussex and Kent.

- OFSTED inspections show that pupils' attainment on entry to full time education is not significantly different from that of statistical neighbours or the national average. However, the baseline assessment scheme used by schools indicates that attainment is below national levels.
- In 2001, at the end of Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils attaining level 2 and above was above the national average in reading, writing and in mathematics. It was also above the level of similar LEAs, except for the attainment of boys in mathematics, which was in line.
- At the end of Key Stage 2 the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in 2001 in English and mathematics was slightly lower than in 2000 but remained in line with both similar LEAs and the national average. In science it was above the national average. The 2002 target of 79 per cent for mathematics remains challenging; that for English, 84 per cent, is extremely challenging.
- In Key Stage 3, the proportion of pupils achieving level 5 or above in all three core subjects was in line with similar LEAs. It was above the national average in English and science.
- Overall, rates of improvement between key stages are in line with those of similar LEAs and national trends.
- At the end of Key Stage 4, 48 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* - C which is in line with both the national average and that of similar LEAs. However, this represents an increase of 3.1 per cent compared to a national increase of 5.1 per cent and an increase amongst similar LEAs of 5.2 per cent. 95 per cent achieved at least one GCSE at grade A* - G, again in line with similar LEAs and the national average.
- The average points score for pupils taking two or more advanced level examinations or advanced GNVQs was in line with the national average and similar LEAs.

18. OFSTED inspections indicate that the proportion of Staffordshire secondary schools which are very good or good overall is better than nationally. The proportion of Staffordshire primary schools which are very good or good overall and the proportion of lessons where teaching is satisfactory or better is in line with the national average. The proportion of schools identified by OFSTED as causing concern is below the national average.

19. Attendance is above the national figure in both primary and secondary schools. Unauthorised absence is below the national figure for primary schools and well below that for secondary schools. The rate of permanent exclusions is broadly in line with the national figure for both primary and secondary schools.

Funding

20. Staffordshire's education standard spending assessment for 2001/02 is very low compared to other shire counties. The SSA per pupil for primary and secondary

pupils is 12 per cent below the national average and around four per cent below the average for statistical neighbours and English counties. The authority ranks 33rd out of 34 English counties.

21. Staffordshire has consistently spent just slightly above SSA (around 0.6%) on education, although elsewhere in the council spending is above SSA by a higher percentage.

22. Total expenditure on schools in 2001/02 is £2,634 per pupil compared with the average for statistical neighbours of £2,808, for English counties of £2,822 and the national average of £2,931. Staffordshire ranks the lowest of all English counties on this comparison.

23. Staffordshire retains slightly more than average funding centrally. The percentage of the local schools budget delegated to schools in 2001/02 is 85.3 per cent, compared with the statistical neighbours' average of 85.7 per cent, the county average 86.3 per cent and the national average 86.5 per cent. The main areas of central spending are:

£ per pupil	Staffs	Statistical neighbours	Counties	England
Strategic management	106	90	86	98
Special education	134	154	146	152
School improvement	21	21	23	26
Access	118	145	152	133
Total LEA activities within the LSB	393	431	427	433

24. Expenditure is very close to the average on that element relating specifically to central administration costs, although Staffordshire is spending above average on strategic management overall.

25. In common with other authorities, Staffordshire's capital expenditure has grown very significantly in recent years. From around £7 million in 1997/98 it has stood at over £30 million in each of the last two years. Basic Need allocations to provide places for additional secondary pupils have been above average and the Authority has been particularly successful in raising contributions from property developers in those areas where extra places are required.

26. Staffordshire has not been eligible for some major funding streams, such as Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones. Although the LEA has been successful in securing additional funding for the authority and for schools, the overall impact of this has been relatively limited.

Council structure

27. The council has been Labour controlled since 1981. There is a history of cross-party agreement on the main issues for education. The council gives education

a high priority and this is recognised by schools. The first inspection of Staffordshire LEA took place in September 1996. Following local government re-organisation in 1997, Stoke City Council became a unitary authority. Since then, as a result of the Local Government Act 2000, there have been considerable changes to the structure and decision making processes of the county council.

28. The county council has 62 members of whom 35 are Labour, 23 Conservative, two are Liberal Democrats with two posts unfilled. The council moved to a cabinet structure with leader in July 2001. The main decision making body is the executive, which is attended by all lead members and chief officers of the council. The education scrutiny committee consists of 12 councillors, including the opposition spokesperson on education, and 17 co-opted members. In July 2001, a new scheme of delegation to chief officers was introduced with the intention of ensuring timely, transparent and effective decision making at all levels of the council.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

29. The Education Development Plan 1999-2002 is a satisfactory document which provides a sound strategy for school improvement except in the area of special educational needs. The contribution of the Education Development Plan to the themes and related objectives of the council's corporate plan is clear and well articulated.

30. The first inspection found the LEA's strategy for school improvement, and the progress it had made in implementing that strategy, to be unsatisfactory. The LEA aspired to lead school improvement and had formulated a plan which defined some priorities for schools. However, the strategy lacked detail, was not systematically monitored and was not influential in schools. The LEA was not always able to direct support to where it was most needed. The necessary improvements have been made.

31. Following the inspection, the LEA produced a satisfactory action plan which subsumed the recommendations of the report under five main headings and, together with its schools, established a steering group to take the plan forward. The LEA sensibly used this plan, together with evaluations of its progress, as part of the detailed audit and analysis of performance from which the priorities of the Education Development Plan for 1999-2002 emerged. These are:

- literacy;
- numeracy;
- information and communication technology;
- standards of achievement;
- quality of teaching;
- quality of leadership and management;
- early years; and
- extending opportunity: extending classroom learning.

32. Overall, the priorities identified reflect national priorities and local needs. However, special educational needs was not given sufficient priority. It is included in 'standards of achievement' and not located within an overall emphasis on inclusion.

As a result it is too narrow in its scope. The findings and recommendations of subsequent reviews of special educational needs were not used well to inform on-going evaluation and bring about improvements during the life of the Education Development Plan. Progress has been too slow.

33. The school survey shows a high level of satisfaction with consultation on the Education Development Plan. A high proportion of schools in all phases report that the strategy for school improvement is clearly set out and that the identified priorities are relevant to their own school development plans.

34. Until 2001, the LEA made steady and satisfactory progress towards meeting its challenging statutory targets for attainment in 2002. In 2001 attainment in English at the end of Key Stage 2 fell back slightly when the national figure remained static. In mathematics, attainment fell back to a slightly greater extent than the national figure. Considerable progress is still required to achieve the targets of 84 per cent for English and 79 per cent for mathematics. At GCSE level, the LEA targets of 51.5 per cent of pupils gaining five A*-C grades and 98 per cent gaining at least one A*-G grade remain challenging.

35. Good progress has been made towards the targets set for exclusions and attendance. The 2002 target for unauthorised absence in primary schools has already been achieved.

36. Progress in implementing the majority of priorities and activities has been satisfactory and good progress has been made with literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. The LEA's monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Education Development Plan has been increasingly thorough and has correctly identified specific difficulties within certain priorities. Success criteria are not always based on the measurement of attainment or progress. Planned work on early years was overtaken by national initiatives, but activities were redesigned appropriately. The LEA recognises that some activities in Priority 8, 'extending opportunity; extending classroom learning' have been under-resourced and time-scales have slipped.

37. Priority 4, 'raising achievement' attempts to address too broad a range of individually worthwhile actions, while giving too little emphasis to the principle of inclusion. Nevertheless it has led to significant improvements in the LEA's knowledge of its schools and to the nature and targeting of support, particularly for schools causing concern.

38. The clarity and thoroughness of the LEA's evaluation of the Education Development Plan has led to sensible recommendations being made to the group working on the next Education Development Plan on how to overcome most of these shortcomings. The priorities identified are appropriate. However, at the time of the inspection, only some of the draft action plans were available.

The allocation of resources to priorities

39. The LEA's allocation of resources to priorities is now satisfactory and strengths outweigh weaknesses. Sufficient improvement has taken place since 1996

when the inspection found it unsatisfactory because it was informal rather than systematic.

40. In a context of low overall funding, the council's priority has been consistently to maintain education spending at a level above the standard spending assessment and in this it has succeeded. In addition, all government spending targets have been met. The planning regime across the council has been thoroughly overhauled since the last inspection report, and financial planning has been improved with the introduction of a three-year planning cycle. Strategic priorities are developed in partnership with schools early in the planning process. These are reflected in budget development, although budget and planning processes are not yet fully integrated.

41. Arrangements for consultation are thorough. There is extensive early consultation on priorities and schools have regular opportunities through meetings and standing groups to make a contribution to the process.

42. The special educational needs budget has been regularly overspent. However, this is the result largely of the failure to establish an effective strategy for special educational needs. In other areas the LEA demonstrates sound budgetary control.

43. The previous report commented very favourably on LEA support to schools in managing their budgets and this quality of support has been maintained. Very few schools are in deficit. The level of school balances on the other hand is too high. 71 per cent of primary schools and 38 per cent of secondary schools carried forward budget surpluses of more than five per cent at the end of 2000/01. The LEA has recognised this as a significant issue, particularly given the low level of funding generally, and has asked schools with high balances to explain how their planned use of balances aligns with school development needs. The authority is beginning to work with schools to establish an understanding about what constitutes a reasonable level of balances in particular circumstances.

44. The funding formula is now out of date, having been subject only to comparatively minor changes, mainly as result of legislative requirements. Although schools do not regard the construction and clarity of the formula as a significant issue, the LEA is right now to embark on a fundamental formula review, which is intended to introduce a new system for funding special educational needs on the basis of an audit of need. The LEA has set itself a challenging timetable for the implementation of such an exercise in a large authority.

Recommendation
In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• establish a protocol with schools for the effective management of school balances.

Structure for achieving Best Value

45. The LEA has satisfactory strategies in place to promote its own continuous improvement, including its implementation of the Best Value regime.

46. A performance management framework for the council as a whole has been agreed and the performance management process is satisfactory and improving rapidly. Linkages are made with corporate objectives and there is a clear and coherent planning cycle. Business plans for the different business units specify actions, responsibilities, time-scales and monitoring arrangements, although target setting is undeveloped. Five out of seven business units within the education department have achieved Investors in People status and the other two will receive accreditation within the current year.

47. The Best Value Performance Plan received an unqualified opinion from the external auditor and the council was judged to have made considerable progress in putting in place the processes and skills needed to make best value work.

48. Education functions are covered adequately within the programme of best value reviews, which has been amended to include a smaller number of more strategic reviews. There is effective support from a corporate best value team, one of whose members works within the education department and is able to provide more targeted support and challenge beyond the best value process itself.

49. Best value reviews across the Council have been variable in quality and effectiveness. Of the two inspected as part of the current inspection, the one on admissions, transport and student services lacked any fundamental challenge and did not result in significant improvement for service users. The review of quality learning services, on the other hand, was a more rigorous exercise, resulting in radical improvements in structures and service delivery.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's support for school improvement

50. Support for school improvement is, overall, a strength of this LEA. The majority of functions, except in the case of special needs, are carried out well or very well. The LEA has a sound knowledge of its schools and is able to provide them with effective monitoring, robust challenge, purposeful support and well-targeted intervention. It has successfully supported schools in improving behaviour and attendance as well as attainment. All services within the department are well led and recognise the need to focus on and contribute to school improvement and the raising of standards. At a strategic level, co-operation with other council services is not always strong, but there are examples of effective co-ordinated action to support under-performing or vulnerable groups of pupils. The total cost of the services is comparable to that in other LEAs and provides good value for money.

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

51. The first inspection reported that the LEA's strategy for providing monitoring, challenge, support and intervention was unsatisfactory overall. It was effective in raising standards in some instances, while in others there were no discernible effects. Areas of greatest need were not identified systematically.

52. Good progress has been made. All the recommendations have been addressed and provision is now quite clearly good. The LEA considers that its performance of this function is now satisfactory and better in some respects. This estimate scarcely does justice to the successive developments over the period. Among the indicators of success are improving standards of pupils' performance, and improved grades for management and climate in school inspections. Almost all schools value the service, including secondary schools, where support was formerly less strong.

53. The LEA's definitions of monitoring, challenge and intervention are very clear and well understood by schools. Protocols have been established which, without undermining the LEA's commitment to self-managing schools, ensure that support is focused on those schools which need it most.

54. The LEA knows its schools well, including the subject departments in secondary schools. Support is targeted accurately and effectively according to well-known and understood criteria. These are part of the LEA's priority support schools initiative which sets out graduated levels of need and ensures that support is allocated in inverse proportion to success. As a further refinement, schools have recently been involved in categorising themselves, collaboratively with the LEA, according to a set of carefully drawn criteria spanning the whole range of performance. This approach sits well with the strong school self-review programme promoted by the LEA.

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

55. The LEA is very effective in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve. The previous inspection indicated a need to improve the analysis of information which informed these activities. The LEA has responded vigorously to the recommendation and regards current provision as good. Very few schools have been identified by OFSTED as causing concern.

56. Monitoring by district inspectors is very effective. Each school is currently entitled to a termly visit by a district inspector. Information from data is well used both to identify agenda items for visits and to underpin the discussion through which targets are agreed. Together the headteacher and inspector review the school's progress through a well-established, annual planning cycle which builds upon and encourages school self-evaluation. The main thrust is towards monitoring and improving standards of attainment and promoting effective management. In both regards, inspectors are well informed, competent in their use of data and able to challenge schools' performance and aspirations. This is particularly true of target setting, about which there is rigorous debate. With few exceptions, headteachers find the process wholly constructive and respect the competence of their district inspectors. Beyond this core activity, autonomy is encouraged and schools are free to select their own agendas for the year's visits. Only when a school requests it, or when there is a strong reason arising from the performance indicators, does the LEA proceed to closer monitoring.

57. Headteachers receive written feedback in the form of a standard record of visit. The majority provide useful guidance to the school in securing further improvement but their impact is limited because they are not sent routinely to all governing bodies. Furthermore, some are concerned mainly with recording the matters discussed. The LEA has recognised that this indicates scope for further reduction in the core entitlement, particularly as the desktop monitoring system becomes ever more sophisticated.

58. The LEA provides schools with a comprehensive range of useful performance data together with good guidance for teachers and governors on its interpretation and use. Information on pupil performance in special schools is developing and is well advanced compared to other authorities. The attainments of pupils in public care are recorded. Comparative financial data is assembled, as is a great deal of contextual information about schools.

59. The majority of information is handled very effectively by the education research and analysis team, recently relocated to the school effectiveness unit in recognition of its important contribution to the monitoring of schools. The team produces the useful standardised sets of information used by schools and inspectors for target setting and evaluation but is also skilful at producing, analysing and interpreting information to order which illuminates particular investigations. The presentation and clarity are excellent. The website and intranet are well used to communicate information.

Recommendation
In order to improve the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring of schools and challenging them to improve, including the use of performance data:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• send records of visit directly to governors.

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

60. When the LEA was inspected in 1996, support for schools in special measures was judged to be very good. However support for schools in other categories of concern was weak. Schools were left to identify their own weaknesses. Since then these weaknesses have been successfully addressed and the LEA believes, with justification, that its systems for identification are now effective. It is clear from the inspection that they are good.

61. The proportion of schools identified by OFSTED as requiring special measures or having serious weaknesses is below the national average. At the same time, schools in these categories receive more attention from LEA staff than in other authorities. The schools in these categories, and also others identified by the LEA as causing concern receive well informed, practical support and challenge.

62. The identification of schools where problems are emerging is greatly improved as a result of the developments in data analysis and school self-review, both of which have given the LEA a deeper and more consistent knowledge of its schools than at the last inspection. There is effective early intervention and graduated support which is triggered by careful analysis of data and sensitive evaluation of other circumstances likely to make a school temporarily less secure, such as the appointment of a new headteacher. Governing bodies are kept well informed once support procedures are instituted.

63. Once causes for concern have been recognised, the support is good. For lesser degrees of under-performance district inspectors negotiate additional monitoring, specialist consultancy or training. Where schools are in need of special measures or have serious weaknesses, or are at risk of slipping into either of these categories, there is a well-trying team approach, normally co-ordinated by the district inspector. The district education officer is part of this team and plays an important role, particularly in personnel and financial matters. Every effort is made to support failing teachers sensitively, and, reportedly, with a high rate of success, but the LEA is resolute when competency procedures are called for. Most schools are turned round successfully in a reasonable time and instances where the measures subsequently fail are few.

Support for literacy

64. Support to schools for raising standards in literacy and the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy is highly satisfactory. This function was not inspected previously. Literacy has been the first priority in the Education Development Plan. The training and support to schools are of high quality. The LEA's detailed performance data support schools in the analysis of test results and identification of strengths and weaknesses. Targets set by schools are challenged rigorously by district inspectors and literacy consultants. Extensive help is given to schools where standards are not sufficiently high. There are regular network meetings for school co-ordinators and courses are available to all schools which do not receive additional support.

65. Baseline assessments show that pupils' language skills are below average when they enter school and their progress in Key Stage 1 is good. By the end of Key Stage 2, standards in English are broadly in line with national averages and statistical neighbours. The 2001 Key Stage 2 target was missed by more than three per cent and this makes the 2002 target much more difficult to achieve. The LEA is seeking the reasons for this lack of progress and its concern is reflected in the current draft of the new Education Development Plan.

66. Consultants who visit schools are well informed and well managed. Teachers have welcomed the production of training packs to support the curriculum and improve teaching, especially with regard to writing. There has been useful guidance on providing more suitable reading material for boys in primary schools. The literacy team has worked closely with consultants for information and communication technology and offers training in how to make better use of this technology in English lessons. There is a good system for involving district inspectors, with their detailed knowledge of the school, in the monitoring of the strategy. Schools understand the nature and extent of the support available for literacy and rated it highly in the school survey.

Support for numeracy

67. Support for numeracy is good. This confirms the LEA's self-evaluation. There is a clear strategy, set out under the second priority of the EDP, which is well understood by schools. It includes improving teaching skills, disseminating good practice through leading mathematics teachers, promoting closer links between home and school, and professional development and research. Support for numeracy was not inspected in 1996.

68. Standards follow a pattern similar to that in literacy. At Key Stage 1 they are above the averages for LEAs nationally and statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 2 they are broadly in line with both although in 2001 they fell back slightly more than the national figure. With the effective work of the leading mathematics teachers and consultants and the additional support for selected schools, the authority is likely to reach its 2002 target.

69. Schools are helped to analyse data and set targets. Where necessary, district inspectors and consultants have rigorously challenged these and as a consequence

some schools have raised their targets. There is an additional support programme for just under half the primary schools in the authority, including those that did not meet their 2000 targets in the Key Stage 2 tests.

70. District inspectors, through their close contact with schools, offer support and advice in the first instance. The consultants are well managed, highly experienced and know how and when to intervene. The work of the numeracy consultants and leading mathematics teachers is good. The training is also good. Teachers report that they have gained in confidence and improved their skills. The numeracy team works closely with the information and communication technology team to develop relevant training materials. There is on-line curriculum information and lists of courses are available on the authority's web site. The level of support they can expect is made clear to schools. It was apparent from the school survey and from discussion that they feel well supported by the authority.

Support for information and communication technology

71. The LEA's support for information and curriculum technology was not inspected in 1996. It is good. There is a clear vision and an effective strategy. This confirms the authority's own assessment of its work. The strategy is well supported by strong technical expertise and systems which the LEA has carefully developed. The authority is at the leading edge of developments in many respects, such as its use of the internet, and takes every opportunity to take part in national pilots and trials. The curriculum strategy is very well linked to the use of ICT for management and administration in schools. The ratio of computers to pupils has already met the 2002 target. Headteachers are enthusiastic about the support they get from consultants and advisors.

72. Evidence from school inspections indicates that standards have continued to rise and pupils are making good progress in both Key Stages 1 and 2. Schools do better than in LEAs nationally and in similar authorities. In Key Stage 3, standards are better than the national expectation, according to teachers' assessments. More pupils achieve a GCSE in ICT than average and more pupils are studying ICT at A level. Targets are likely to be met for level 5 work by 2004.

73. The LEA has supported its schools well. They have been given sound advice over a long period, for example in relation to the procurement of hardware and software using funding from the National Grid for Learning. The authority presented three options to schools when choosing from among the national providers of New Opportunities Fund ICT training. However, many schools have been disappointed with the training they received. The authority then supported schools effectively and filled the gaps in the training by offering its own courses in basic skills and more advanced work.

74. The development plan for ICT is sound and, although ambitious, provides a firm basis for further development of ICT across the curriculum. Schools benefit from a wide range of services, including the education joint information technology unit, which offers technical support. The quality learning service and the school effectiveness unit ably provide expertise to help schools with monitoring standards, making best use of funds, and identifying areas in need of further support. There is a

central information technology unit which works in partnership with the above units. Access is also available through LEA membership of a broad band consortium in the West Midlands. The Staffordshire Learning Net, is used effectively to develop and disseminate curriculum initiatives and guidance and the authority has won awards and recognition for this work. Schools already set up their own web pages. The authority is a recognised provider for New Opportunities Fund training at secondary level in the use of information and communication technology for geography and design and technology.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

75. The LEA's support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is good. This is in line with its own evaluation of the support it provides. Key Stage 3 was not reported specifically at the last inspection which was well before the introduction of the national strategy had begun. The LEA has embraced it with enthusiasm and become a pilot authority.

76. The LEA strategic planning is clear and backed up by detailed action planning with precise objectives and meticulous timing. Broadly, it has sought to engage fully in the pilot projects and learn lessons from them to the advantage of all schools as the main national strategy came on stream. Evaluation is through close monitoring of test scores, including optional and progress tests, and through systematic collection of qualitative feedback from the pilot schools. The implementation has kept to schedule and has been carefully reported at each stage

77. The LEA has disseminated the experiences of the pilot schools on its website and published an attractive and useful introductory guidance booklet for all schools. Some of the pilot schools had been able, from the limited evidence of the first year, to discern a measurable rise in standards. The Department for Education and Skills reports small but significant gains across the schools' Key Stage 3 results between 1998 and 2001 as compared to non-pilot schools. All the schools cited benefits in, for example, curriculum construction and continuity with Key Stage 2 and, particularly, teaching methodology.

78. The LEA introduced all of its schools to the main strategy last year, ensuring that they set targets for the year 2002 and implemented the framework on time. The leadership by the strategy manager is strong and enthusiastic and the line management is efficient.

Support for ethnic minority groups including travellers

79. This function was not inspected during the previous inspection. Support for ethnic minority groups, including Travellers is satisfactory and improving. The creation of the ethnic minority achievement unit within the school effectiveness unit, together with the appointment of a senior inspector to lead the work of the EMAU in August 2001, have been positive developments. The LEA has a well thought out strategy. It monitors effectively the use and impact of the ethnic minority achievement grant and encourages schools to use school based funding flexibly in order to meet pupils' needs. Support to isolated and newly arrived pupils who are in the early stages of learning English is targeted well.

80. The LEA makes explicit and helpful links between curriculum initiatives, such as the national strategies for literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3 and the needs of pupils with English as an additional language. In April 2000, all of the ethnic minority achievement grant was delegated, and the number of schools receiving funding increased from 12 to 27. The criteria for the deployment of the grant are transparent and based upon attainment data alongside relevant assessment criteria. The LEA monitors the attainment, admissions and exclusions of minority ethnic groups. Pupil-level data is used well and progress is reported on a termly basis to the lead member's multicultural advisory body. There are informative and helpful annual reports on the attainment of pupils from ethnic minority groups across the key stages within Staffordshire.

81. Work on improving the performance of minority ethnic pupils is beginning. One useful initiative has identified the under-achievement of pupils of Pakistani heritage in science. However, this work has yet to have an impact on standards. Pupils of Pakistani heritage, who form the largest community group in the county, are underachieving in core subjects at all key stages compared to other minority groups and the LEA average

82. The needs of 160 traveller pupils are met by the West Midlands Consortium Education Services for Traveller Children. This support, purchased by the LEA, is well planned and targeted but pupil attainment and other indicators such as those for exclusion and attendance are not monitored and analysed in sufficient detail. The low numbers of Traveller pupils in secondary schools is also a cause for concern.

Recommendations
In order to improve support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• extend work on the root causes of underachievement of pupils of Pakistani heritage and take corresponding action; and• undertake regular analysis of the achievement of Traveller pupils facilitated by closer monitoring of outcomes relating to the work of the West Midlands Consortium Education Services for Traveller Children.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

83. Support for gifted and talented pupils was not included in the previous inspection. The LEA and its schools have not benefited directly from the Excellence in Cities initiative. However, the LEA's support for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory and improving, with progress more marked since the summer of 2000. Prior to that, the LEA relied heavily on a strong portfolio of continuing professional development and advisory visits to schools on different aspects of the curriculum, drawing on consultants as appropriate.

84. The success of the centrally based summer school in 2000 and the six school based summer schools in 2001 has provided a much needed impetus to develop policy and accelerate strategy. The LEA's policy gives schools a clear framework to develop whole school review, effective assessment, and the basis to plan learning strategies. Communication with schools, for example on curriculum updates and the dissemination of effective practice, is facilitated through the intranet.

85. The LEA has been slow to adopt the Excellence in Cities framework as a basis to develop guidance on the identification of pupils and to improve its targeting of support. It has recognised the tension between the need for co-ordinators of gifted and talented provision in schools and other competing demands on school budgets. Pupil-level targets have not yet been set.

Recommendation

In order to improve support to schools for gifted and talented pupils:

- introduce a target-setting process for gifted and talented pupils.

Support for school management

86. The LEA's support for school management is highly satisfactory. The inspection report of 1996 noted that OFSTED school inspections showed that management was generally sound but with some weaknesses in school development planning and financial management. Since then, school inspection reports have indicated that management is slightly below average in primary schools but slightly above in secondary, including middle schools. However, improvement rates are greater in both phases than those found nationally or in similar LEAs, and the LEA takes this as evidence that its substantial efforts to support school management are bearing fruit. Headteachers in both primary and secondary schools rate the LEA's support for senior and middle managers highly.

87. The LEA's approaches to school self-review and planning are at the heart of its support for management. In consequence, a sensible and clear cycle of development and financial planning has been devised which all schools are encouraged to adopt. This forms the basis both for monitoring by the LEA and school self-review. The LEA has provided an extensive and useful programme of general training for senior managers and governors, offering alternative models of self-review. The training is far-reaching, extending to the roles of all teachers in self and peer-evaluation. Review documents and school development plans are submitted to the LEA for monitoring.

88. The quality learning service provides a good range of courses for senior and middle managers and subject leaders. It researches its programme requirements carefully and responds to the analyses of evaluations by users. The views of headteachers are mainly favourable and there is evidence of continuing improvement in both range and quality. The service is flexible and increasingly provides bespoke school-based training.

89. The dissemination of effective practice through a networking programme is a particular strength. Schools gave the steps taken to disseminate good practice the highest grading of all the authorities included in the survey sample. Beacon schools feature strongly but many schools make useful contributions.

90. Headteachers meet regularly with LEA officers, including the director. As a result they are well informed about the LEA's intentions and generally subscribe to its thinking. Their appreciation of the education development plan has improved since the Best Value review survey in 2000.

91. Schools' understanding of Best Value principles, however, is variable, both as clients of the LEA and as service providers. In many cases it does not go far beyond their duty as purchasers to obtain value for money. The LEA clearly has further to go in preparing headteachers and governors for this aspect of their work.

Recommendation

In order to improve support to school management:

- increase the Best Value element in management training for headteachers and governors.

Support to school governors

92. Support to governors was previously assessed as satisfactory. No detailed fieldwork was done in this area. The LEA's own view is that has remained satisfactory. Overall, schools rated it as better than satisfactory and two-thirds of them judged it to be good.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

93. The 1996 inspection did not report in any detail on individual management services but commented that schools held them in high regard. This generally remains the case. Levels of buyback are high and, with one exception, management services are at least satisfactory and often good.

94. The LEA provides schools with a well co-ordinated 'Buyers' Guide' to services, which sets out information on service levels in a clear and concise manner. The distribution of the guide at the same time as the final budget share is too late, although schools are informed in advance of any proposed changes in what is on offer.

95. Services are managed as part of business units with well-structured business plans, though the success criteria for activities are often not specific enough. Consultation and quality assurance are well developed with each business unit, for example, having a management board, on which headteachers are represented.

96. The LEA has made variable progress in developing its role as a broker rather than necessarily a provider of services. Schools understand this change of emphasis, which is most evident in respect of ICT, where advice on a range of alternative suppliers is readily available.

97. **Financial services** to schools are good, a view shared by the great majority of schools, who regard the services as good or very good. Virtually all schools buy into a flexible and differentiated package, providing a range of advice and support. Schools value a single point of contact for advice on budget matters and receive a helpful budget pack. Benchmarking data has been made available over a long period and is now being reassessed. Financial systems generally work reliably, with long-standing automatic reconciliation and efficient payroll arrangements in place.

98. **Personnel services** are good overall, and better than the LEA's own assessment of satisfactory. The function was not reported upon in the earlier inspection. Services are well differentiated according to schools' needs. Schools demonstrate a high level of confidence in the services which is reflected in the level of buy back. Support is readily accessible. There are effective channels of formal and informal communication with teaching and non-teaching unions. Well-targeted training is provided for heads and governing bodies.

99. The LEA's assessment of **property services** to schools as satisfactory is not endorsed by this inspection. Property services are unsatisfactory and received among the lowest ratings in the school survey. Lines of accountability and responsibility for property support in the council are confused and unsatisfactory. The recent difficulties encountered in the creation of the joint property unit have compounded this and the authority has sensibly planned for a further overhaul of arrangements.

Recommendation
In order to improve property services:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">organise and explain the services so that schools are clear where responsibilities lie.

100. There is considerable and unsatisfactory variability in the management of building works, with schools reporting many projects overrunning on time and budget. Technical support to schools is also variable and links with a coherent asset management planning process across the authority are unclear. In terms of an emergency response to major incidents, on the other hand, there is evidence of a very prompt and well-organised support to schools.

101. The LEA has assessed its support to schools for **ICT in administration** as good; on the evidence of this inspection, the service is good and a strength of the authority.

102. There is a comprehensive and purposeful strategy to maximise the use of available money. Responsibilities are clear and there are effective links with both

corporate and curriculum developments. Support to schools, though sometimes overstretched, is regarded by schools as expert and very effective.

103. Electronic communications are well developed. The LEA is well placed to make returns on pupil level data this year and a successful trial has taken place. However, there are some technical problems in electronic data transfer between institutions. New systems are currently being refined to enable primary schools to send pupils' records to secondary schools. The authority will meet its 2002 target for the introduction and use of broadband technology. The authority operates an impressive website as well as an intranet, which is increasingly a major means of communication with schools.

104. The authority assessed **cleaning** services as satisfactory and **grounds maintenance** as good. Both services were found in this inspection to be highly satisfactory with few areas of major weakness. Cleaning services are well-managed, cost-effective and clear about priorities for improvement. The service specification is negotiated to meet the needs of schools but the quality of the service is variable. The service offered by the grounds maintenance teams is also variable. Nevertheless service planning is customer focused and the stable workforce is generally well regarded by schools.

105. The school **catering** service is very good. Schools gave catering arrangements the highest grading of all the authorities included in the survey sample. Catering contracts meet individual school needs. Quality assurance is tight and the service is achieving high quality at average costs. There are numerous imaginative initiatives to promote healthy eating and an enthusiasm for good food. Links with curriculum development are promoted both at authority level through advisers and at individual school level through food technology departments.

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

106. Staffordshire's strategies for the recruitment and retention of teachers, and for assuring the quality of teachers, are satisfactory and improving, with no significant weaknesses; this confirms the LEA's own assessment. The function was not assessed in the previous inspection. Overall, Staffordshire is more successful than most in retaining newly qualified teachers for a second year, has fewer teachers leaving during the year and a lower number of unfilled vacancies and working days lost per teacher.

107. Much of the satisfactory work in this area took place in autumn 2001, with the formation of a recruitment and retention working party. Teachers' associations and headteachers are represented on this group, but so far there has been no involvement of governors. Initial work has focused on publicising Staffordshire and on ensuring that information on recruitment, retention and vacancies is available to inform future development. The LEA has set up an arrangement with a private company to provide supply cover in primary schools from April 2002 and plans to establish a pool recruitment system. It is too early to determine the success of the strategy, but the pace of work in this area has increased satisfactorily in the past four months.

108. Support for the induction of newly qualified teachers is good overall; schools consider it satisfactory. The programme for the induction of newly qualified teachers is comprehensive and thorough, with a series of relevant, well attended, daytime sessions which are well regarded. The LEA supports local meetings throughout the induction year aimed at familiarisation and mutual support. Useful written materials are provided and the LEA's website contains information specifically for newly qualified teachers. Schools, especially in the primary sector, value the induction programme for new headteachers.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

109. At the time of the first inspection school improvement services were said to be unsatisfactory. The inspection and advisory services, in particular, were largely reactive and depended excessively on OFSTED school inspections to provide the cue for much of their work.

110. The LEA responded promptly and effectively by realigning its inspection and advisory services, known as the quality learning service. A powerful factor in the improvements that have been made since the last inspection has been the high standard of strategic planning and a capacity for successfully implementing radical solutions. The priorities identified in the education development plan, together with the outcomes of a Best Value review in 2000, have effectively driven both the activities of services and led to changes in their structure and organisation. The quality learning services were divided into two. The LEA considers, rightly, that it now has a good and effective set of services, that provide good value for money.

111. The school effectiveness unit focuses on providing schools with monitoring, challenge, intervention and support of a high standard. District inspectors have a close knowledge of their schools and local circumstances and can draw upon the specialist expertise of colleagues as necessary. They are well qualified for their roles thanks to the good balance of primary and secondary management experience which the LEA has been at pains to achieve. District education officers have parallel, equally effective but complementary links with schools. The education research and analysis team, which plays an increasingly important part in monitoring schools by analysing performance indicators, has been brought within the ambit of the school effectiveness unit.

112. The part of the service still retaining the title, quality learning service, is responsible mainly for curriculum support and continuing professional development. It is to a great extent a bought-back service. Its separation facilitates its development as a competitive business unit without the unrealistic obligation to promote its rivals. The task of developing brokerage is left to the school effectiveness unit which is well placed to recommend alternative providers in the course of its school contacts. It is too early to say whether this will develop into a comprehensive system but it has already brought about a culture shift.

113. The LEA leads the Staffordshire and Midlands Consortium, which operates at arm's length from the quality learning service, while still under its direction. It enables the LEA, with others, to be part of a viable service carrying out OFSTED school inspections without damaging its other functions. Inspectors benefit from the

opportunity to hone their inspection skills and keep abreast of developments in schools nationally. They use this experience well in their work with schools. Staffordshire does not inspect its own schools.

114. School improvement services are well led and promote a clear vision of school improvement which is shared by schools. Individual services are equally well led by managers with a strong grasp of strategic issues and the ability to implement detailed and complex plans. Communication between services is good; priorities and purposes are effectively shared with middle managers and other inspectors through a variety of regular meetings. Within services, staff have relevant expertise and up-to-date knowledge.

115. The deployment of staff in services to support school improvement consistently matches service priorities and schools' needs. Inspectors and advisers are deployed according to their expertise. It is normal for them to contribute to both quality learning services and the school effectiveness unit but the proportions of time are carefully controlled in the interests of the services and the schools.

116. Performance management is good. At annual reviews with line managers, assignments are reviewed, performance is analysed and objectives and targets agreed. These are, in turn, linked to school performance indicators. The electronic diaries used across the service allow effective analysis of the use of time so that it can be related to effectiveness. New entrants are carefully mentored and there are monthly professional development days for all staff. There are comprehensive staff handbooks for each service.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's special educational needs provision

117. There are significant weaknesses in the LEA's strategy for special educational needs, in the steps it takes to meet its statutory obligations and in the value for money provided by its work. Progress towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs has been inhibited by a lack of vision and clear direction. There has been a high level of consensus about the nature and pattern of provision for pupils with special educational needs. Historically, members and officers have been reluctant to initiate a debate with schools and parents about educational inclusion which might call this into question. One outcome is the general perception on the part of schools and parents that having a statement is the only way to ensure a child's needs will be met. Until recently patterns of expenditure exceeded planned budgets. Furthermore, the LEA is not doing enough to enhance the capability of mainstream schools to meet the needs of pupils with an increasingly broad range of special educational needs. Schools are not clear what they are accountable for and what is the responsibility of the LEA. Despite a series of reviews, the LEA has not acted decisively enough to address the weaknesses identified. Since taking up post, the director has demonstrated a determination to do so. However, there is a long way to go before the LEA's emerging vision directly influences educational outcomes.

Strategy

118. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs was not a major focus of the inspection of 1996. The director recognises its weaknesses. Her initial reaction has been to begin to build the capacity for change and she has initiated a high profile countywide debate on educational inclusion. Despite promising beginnings, there is as yet no coherent strategy. This is poor.

119. The LEA does not have a clearly articulated strategy with identified objectives for special educational needs. It has not told schools how it intends to develop provision in the long term. The special educational needs policy was written in 1994 and is poorly aligned to the government's programme of action. More recently, some broad principles for inclusion have been consulted upon and agreed. However, they do not take sufficient account of local circumstances and there has been no consultation on practice, detailed plans, timescales or targets. The LEA's 'All schools are special' project has identified, supported and disseminated examples of effective inclusive practice in some Staffordshire schools and the outreach role of beacon special schools has been promoted. Despite this recent activity, there is uncertainty across the authority on the LEA position on inclusion and how it intends to move forward. Special school headteachers do not have a complete understanding of the LEA's proposals. Mainstream headteachers are unclear about how resources will be made available to support increased inclusion and uncertain of their capacity to meet the needs of a broader range of pupils.

120. Since 1994, there has been a series of papers and reviews which have identified areas for improvement in relation to special educational needs. Action to take forward this improvement has been constrained by a relatively low priority given by the authority to special educational needs and by instability in staffing the relevant senior posts. Following the 2000 review, an action plan was agreed by cabinet. However, it lacked realistic time-scales and was not supported by adequate financial planning. It has been superseded by the current pupil and student services business plan. This focuses on identified difficulties such as the revision of out-of-date policies and revising the formal assessment processes. Within the new education development plan, special educational needs and inclusion are identified as priorities.

121. The lack of a strategy for special educational needs has led to a pattern of provision which is distinct from the emerging national picture. The LEA has a high percentage of pupils with statements. The increase in percentage has outstripped that of statistical neighbours and the current figure of 4.1 per cent is well above the national average. The number of new statements each year remains high and an increasingly high proportion of them results in a placement in one of the authority's 23 special schools. The demand-led approach is damaging the LEA's ability to develop supportive financial planning.

Recommendation
In order to improve the effectiveness of the strategy for special educational needs:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • produce, as a matter of urgency, a strategic plan which sets out the vision for the future, identifies objectives, establishes a timetable for implementation, and includes a budget.

Statutory obligations

122. The LEA is failing to meet its statutory duties for special educational needs. There has been insufficient improvement since the previous inspection which reported long delays in the statementing process. Although there has recently been some change, this has not yet had time to take effect.

123. The statutory assessment process has suffered from under-investment and unsatisfactory management. In 2000/2001 the percentage of statements issued within 18 weeks was 79 per cent when exceptions were not counted, which is just below the national average of 82 per cent. This fell to 31 per cent, substantially below the national average of 57 per cent, when all referrals are taken into account. This position is worsened by the high proportion of statements that have exceptions. Furthermore, over the last 15 months, special educational needs services have been re-organised into districts. During this period, rates of completion when exceptions were not counted varied considerably, reaching a low of 30 per cent in April 2001. The LEA has recently taken steps to improve this position and has invested substantially in a new structure for the process of statutory assessment, although this has yet to be consolidated. This has led to improved completion figures in recent

months which have yet to be recognised in schools. The formal assessment process was heavily criticised in the school survey.

124. The LEA has been slow to analyse the source of late advice and discuss improvement targets with the agencies involved. It has now reviewed its processes and introduced an alert system which ensures that statementing officers' time is sufficiently targeted at priorities.

125. The LEA has not yet given enough attention to the annual review process and there is no system to ensure that any required amendments are completed within the statutory timescale. Generally, LEA officers do not attend annual reviews although there has been a focus on Year 6 reviews recently. This has been an authority wide approach which does not work where a middle school system is operated.

126. The number of appeals to the special educational needs tribunal has been rising annually to 75 in the current financial year. The LEA attributes this rise to its previous practice of withdrawing and acceding to parents' wishes. The LEA is now defending its decisions.

127. The parent partnership scheme is beginning to provide good support, advice and information to parents. The quality of publications is high and support includes newsletters, drop in sessions, parent workshops and a help-line. The scheme also provides support to parents if their child is subject to the permanent exclusion process.

Recommendations

In order to meet statutory obligations with regard to special educational needs:

- produce a higher proportion of statements within 18 weeks; and
- ensure statements are reviewed annually and that required amendments are completed within the statutory timescale.

School improvement

128. Support for school improvement in the area of special educational needs is unsatisfactory. Again, recent and planned improvements have yet to have an impact.

129. There are no effective criteria or moderation procedures to ensure an equitable distribution of resources and support in relation to need. District assessment panels have been established but not all statements are subject to a panel decision, schools are not represented on the panels and there are no moderation procedures in place. Guidelines for the operation of panels are still in draft form despite a target completion date of July 2001. This lack of clear guidance contributes to the continuing perception in a number of schools that applying more pressure on the authority, either as a school or a parent, is the most certain way of achieving the desired result.

130. The LEA has been too slow to recognise the need for an authority-wide audit in order to assist in the identification of a mechanism for distributing funds according to need. Plans for this, however, are not fully developed, schools have not yet been consulted and indicative time-scales, whilst only tentative, are over-ambitious given the current position.

131. The LEA has taken a series of steps designed to improve the funding arrangements for special educational needs in mainstream schools. It has delegated a notional amount through the formula to all schools, introduced earmarked pupil funding and phased the delegation of statement funding. However, these changes are not set within an overall review of funding for special education including the funding of special schools and the centrally managed budgets. The introduction of earmarked pupil funding has shifted limited resources from statutory to non-statutory intervention but the LEA acknowledges that this can only be a transitional step because it relies on principles similar to those of formal assessment.

132. Criteria for statutory assessment are consistent with the original Code of Practice but in need of some updating to reflect the revised one.

133. The monitoring of pupil progress and of the use of support and resources is improving. The LEA monitors a sample of annual reviews and attended all Year 6 reviews conducted during the autumn term of 2001. There are plans to monitor out of county placements in the near future.

134. Concerns about the availability of support services, in particular the educational psychology service, were highlighted by the school survey. A recent increase in the number of educational psychologists, following a proactive approach to recruitment and retention, has enabled the LEA to respond to some of these legitimate concerns. Schools understand how they are allocated time from both the psychology service and the special educational needs support service. However, the use of that time is not well defined and too often support focuses on activities with individual pupils rather than on improving a school's capacity to meet the needs of children with special educational needs. The new service level agreement for the psychology service is moving in this direction but it is not yet fully understood by schools.

135. A 'Dyslexia Friendly' schools initiative, organised by the special educational needs support service, has been well received by schools and an autism outreach service has been established with a clear remit for supporting and training parents and school staff. However, despite these initiatives and the wide ranging programme of training and support, schools in general do not perceive that they have increased capacity to meet a wider range of needs and the transfer of children from mainstream to special continues.

136. The LEA provides an extensive programme of professional development and support for teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators and learning support assistants. The programme includes access to accredited courses, short courses and networks. The use of 'P' scales to enhance assessment in the core subjects has begun in the special schools and there is an appropriate programme to increase awareness of this approach within mainstream schools with a focus on literacy and numeracy.

Recommendations

In order to support school improvement in the area of SEN:

- ensure the appropriate involvement of schools in assessment panels and establish a moderation process;
- allocate money to schools according to need; and
- shift the emphasis of support services work in schools to prevention, early intervention and capacity building.

Value for money

137. There are significant weaknesses in the value for money of the LEA's work in the area of special educational needs.

138. In 2001-2 the overall funding for special educational needs, at 12.8 per cent of the local schools budget, is significantly below that of statistical neighbours and the national average. The use of the money has not been well planned and there have been reactive responses to emerging needs. There has been little challenge, as the annual overspend has become an 'accepted' position. The frequency and scale of the overspend show the weakness of financial planning and management.

139. The largest proportion of the special educational needs budget is distributed to schools through the statementing process. This is not a transparent process for schools. Furthermore, the criteria for allocation of recently introduced earmarked pupil funding are not clear and resources are not matched to identified need. However, this increased level of delegation has not been accompanied by an effective system to monitor the use of these resources. The LEA has recognised this need in a draft action plan but there are no detailed proposals or timescales.

140. Evidence from the school survey and meetings with headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators indicate uncertainty over the respective roles of schools and the LEA. Whilst the LEA has an appropriate understanding it has not successfully communicated or demonstrated this to all schools. In the recent past, members of support services have carried out tasks which are school responsibilities.

Recommendations

In order to improve value for money in SEN:

- establish, as a matter of urgency, clear criteria for the allocation of special educational needs resources to schools and a system to monitor their use and effectiveness; and
- make explicit to schools their responsibilities in respect of special educational needs.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

The strategy to promote social inclusion

141. Overall the steps taken by the LEA to promote social inclusion are satisfactory. The council is committed to minimising social exclusion. This vision is carried through into all seven themes of the corporate plan and particularly into the theme of 'a learning society'. A proposed local public service agreement focuses on social inclusion through the targeting of resources on identified under-performing schools and under-achieving groups of pupils.

142. An appropriate emphasis has been given to improving and maintaining school attendance, and this continues to be a high priority. Support for behaviour is good. Provision for the relatively small number of pupils who are excluded permanently from school is improving and reintegration rates are high. The council's support for combating racism is recognised and appreciated by schools.

143. However, the social services and education departments have been slow to establish joint strategies and protocols for the exchange of information about children in public care and communication between social services and schools about the most vulnerable children, remains difficult. Furthermore, the broad principles which will guide the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs, have only recently been agreed.

144. Within the education department there is a tradition of sound advice and guidance to schools on pastoral care and, more recently, on support for social inclusion. A social inclusion co-ordination group has been formed to ensure that this advice takes account of curriculum developments and school improvement strategies. It also acts a focus for work with other agencies and partners. A senior adviser is charged with developing an integrated strategy for all aspects of the LEA's response to social inclusion.

The supply of school places

145. The LEA's planning of school places is unsatisfactory overall despite some elements of effective practice. The school organisation plan does not draw clear conclusions from the data presented, it gives little indication of the key areas for action either at authority or district level, and it does not make explicit links with other LEA plans.

146. In the primary sector there are currently around nine per cent surplus places. However, despite the prediction of a more rapid fall in the number of primary pupils than that found nationally, the LEA has not presented a clear strategy for dealing with this decline.

147. Furthermore, the LEA does not have a clear overall strategy for ensuring the provision of sufficient secondary school places, although it has gained access to high levels of basic need funding, and has projects and plans in place to provide more secondary accommodation. The school organisation plan shows that in 2005-6 secondary school rolls will rise significantly above what they are now. Even with the

planned increases in accommodation, they will still be in excess of capacity in 2007-8.

148. In the secondary sector, the authority has the highest level of overcrowding of any authority in the country. In January 2001, 60 out of 69 secondary and middle schools were operating over their assessed capacity. Of these, 43 schools were more than 10 per cent in excess of capacity, with six schools more than 40 per cent over capacity.

149. The authority's approach to school place planning has been reactive and has not involved a strategic approach to the management of admission numbers. Schools currently propose admission numbers to the LEA rather than vice versa.

150. While the age of transfer in most of the area is 11, there are pockets of provision operating a three-tier system with middle schools. The school organisation plan does not address the three-tier system in the context of tackling the twin issues of primary over-capacity and secondary under-capacity. The LEA has, however, undertaken research which concludes that the existence of the two systems does not have an adverse impact on attainment.

151. There have been some successes. The issue of small sixth forms has been successfully tackled in some areas of the county through the development of combined sixth form centres, although the implications of these for some practical issues, such as capacity data, has not been clearly thought through. The authority has reduced infant class sizes early and has maintained them under thirty. Pupil number forecasting has improved and is now within an acceptable margin of error. The school organisation committee operates with an appropriate degree of independence and has undergone training. There are effective links with neighbouring authorities and with other partners such as the dioceses.

Recommendations

In order to improve the supply of school places, as part of the school organisation plan:

- analyse the supply of, and demand for, school places at county and district level; and
- reduce overcrowding in secondary schools and primary school surplus places.

Admissions

152. Arrangements for school admissions are satisfactory. This is in line with the LEA's own assessment. The function was not reported on in the previous inspection report. The management of admissions was subject to a Best Value Review in 2000, together with home to school transport and the student support service. Schools are generally very satisfied with admission arrangements and the number of parents who

obtain their first preference of school is very high at 98 per cent, above that of statistical neighbours and the national average. However, this is in the context of surplus capacity in primary sector and unmanaged overcrowding in secondary schools. Links between the annual consultation with governing bodies concerning school admission levels and the LEA's planning for school places are not developed sufficiently well.

153. The information provided to parents is satisfactory and in the main complies with the admissions code of practice although there is no opportunity for parents to offer feedback on the admissions and appeals process. The booklet for parents does not define the measurement of distance sufficiently clearly where this is used as a criterion to determine priority at over-subscribed schools. Both primary and secondary schools consider the handling of admission appeals to be more than satisfactory. Secondary appeals are held in time for all pupils to be inducted into their new schools in the summer term. However, the small number of primary appeals is not completed early enough in the school year.

Asset management

154. The asset management planning process is unsatisfactory, mainly because of weaknesses in the data upon which it is based.

155. Although information on building condition was collected on time and assessed positively by the Department for Education and Skills, schools felt they were excluded from the process and have not found the results helpful or reliable. A programme to update condition surveys is now under way, which aims to rectify these problems, using new agreed procedures and new computer software. Data on suitability has been graded by the Department for Education and Skills as below average, showing a major non-compliance or a significant inaccuracy in five of the nine elements.

156. Schools have only the haziest understanding of how the LEA determines priorities for investment in its buildings. Procedures for prioritisation remain undeveloped in the local policy statement, although the introduction of joint investment plans with schools is one of a number of promising developments. Consultation has been improved through the introduction during the last year of an asset management planning forum, involving headteachers and other partners.

157. The LEA has been successful in securing funding to make significant inroads into the backlog of condition work. Staffordshire's backlog is below the average both nationally and for English counties. The authority explored relatively early and successfully the private finance initiative route to investment, with one major project completed and another in preparation. The lack of confidence, however, in the reliability of data and in prioritisation processes has inhibited the development of an agreed long-term programme with schools.

Recommendation:**In order to improve asset management planning:**

- assemble accurate premises data as a basis for reaching an understanding with schools on priorities for buildings investment.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

158. Support for children out of school is satisfactory and improving. This judgement is in line with the views of a majority of schools and that of the LEA. Much of the improvement has been in the last eighteen months. Appropriate arrangements are now being made.

159. The LEA is on course to provide full-time support for pupils excluded for more than fifteen days by September 2002. However, during 2000-1 seven out of ten pupils out of school received less than ten hours provision a week. An expansion of pupil referral unit places by 48 will increase capacity to meet anticipated demand.

160. High proportions of excluded pupils are being re-integrated and there is effective monitoring of pupil progress. The LEA, through its district integration panels and headteacher/FE forums, is beginning to manage the movement and re-integration of excluded pupils effectively. It is developing its commissioning role for 'hard to place' pupils at key stage four, facilitated through multi-agency approaches involving youth and community, outdoor education, special educational needs support services and private providers. Students are placed in alternative provision quickly and attendance, which is encouraged and monitored by behaviour support assistants, is high compared to statistical neighbours. Established initiatives are also beginning to have an impact. An example of this is RESET, a year 11 project, that has had particular success, with 29 out of 38 pupils going on to full-employment or further education. Arrangements for pupils educated at home and for those experiencing interrupted education are satisfactory.

Attendance

161. The LEA's support for attendance is now good. This is an improvement since the previous inspection, when it was satisfactory. The LEA has an effective strategy for promoting school attendance which is understood by schools. School attendance is seen as an important part of the LEA's school improvement strategy and, because of the part that it plays in reducing the effects of social exclusion, it is also a key target in the recent public service agreement bid.

162. The LEA recognises that there was a decline in service during the move to multi-disciplinary district working in 2000. Despite this, attendance figures for the same period were high and consistently above statistical neighbours, while those for unauthorised absence have been lower. OFSTED reports also show attendance is good. This performance has been achieved with the lowest level of funding for education welfare services among similar authorities.

163. Positive changes in practice include moving from education welfare casework to preventative work, improving the use of data to target resources a system to monitor the use and effectiveness and more focussed intervention. Primary school attendance data have been used to deploy officers to the forty primary schools most in need of support. Secondary and middle schools now receive a delegated budget for 50 per cent of their education welfare service entitlement, in order to meet specific needs. Guidance on extended leave of absence in term time, a significant problem in part of the county, has been issued, and is having an impact. Judicious use is made of statutory powers alongside fast-track procedures in conjunction with the courts. Schools are being challenged to make further improvements to school attendance.

Behaviour support

164. Support for behaviour is good and improving. Significant progress has been made since the previous inspection which found it to be satisfactory. Although many of the LEA 's initiatives are recent, earlier work has had a positive impact. Inspection reports show that behaviour and climate are generally good in Staffordshire schools. Permanent exclusions, which are below statistical neighbours, have declined and LEA targets have been met.

165. Much of the improvement can be traced to the setting up of the social inclusion unit in January 2000, the review of the original behaviour support plan and the recent re-organisation of behaviour support along district lines from September 2000. The LEA showed good judgement in turning the broad targets in its second behaviour support plan into high quality operational planning.

166. The LEA has been particularly successful at using data on pupil exclusions or pupils at risk of exclusion to identify the root causes of difficult behaviour. It has taken targeted action, an example being its support for a particular cohort of pupils of Pakistani heritage in one part of the county and its work to reduce the number of pupils with special educational needs being excluded in other areas. The LEA has also supported effectively the recent introduction of 18 learning support units in its high schools and increased its behaviour support in Key Stage 3. Referrals to the LEA for behaviour support have increased and repeat referrals are monitored and acted on. The LEA is targeting further support on schools that have had a large rise in fixed term exclusions over the last two years, and where pupils with statements have been permanently excluded.

167. The LEA has increased its capacity to support schools across all key stages and is placing a high priority on early and well-targeted intervention and support for reintegration. It is now drawing on a broad repertoire of interventions that include the use of anger management, behaviour audits, pastoral support plans and circle time.

Health and safety, welfare and child protection

168. The LEA provides satisfactory support to schools to promote pupil welfare and child safety.

169. The LEA's child protection procedures are clear and understood by schools. It provides comprehensive training which is generally well received, although not all teachers needing to update their expertise are able to access this. Reasonable steps are taken to maintain an accurate list of designated teachers and follow up action is taken if schools do not make returns. Changes to the child protection registers are monitored, but analysis of school referrals is not done routinely. In guidance produced by the Area Child Protection Committee, the role of other agencies is clear and understood by schools. However, communication between social services and schools following referral remains unsatisfactory despite follow-up by the LEA.

170. The LEA's support for health and safety is satisfactory and there has been recent improvement. Comprehensive guidance has been issued to schools and model policies and updates are circulated through the intranet. Schools understand the procedures for assessing and monitoring risk. They carry out systematic health and safety checks, using an LEA model. In addition, LEA health and safety advisers audit school systems and procedures and monitor school action plans produced in response to their audit reports. The LEA officers provide targeted training for school staff and governors. An accident reporting system was introduced last year and currently the level of accidents is low. Regular reports on progress with health and safety issues which are made to a lead member's advisory body fulfil a useful monitoring and accountability function and give professional associations a means to influence policy and direction.

Children in public care

171. The council has made children in public care a priority and recognises that while support is satisfactory overall, some weaknesses remain. It performs adequately its duty to promote the educational achievement of children in its care and it has good data, maintained on a joint database, about these children. Pupil achievement is mixed. It is better than statistical neighbours at Key Stage 4, below at Key Stage 2, but on course to meet the targets in the Quality Protects management plan. The number of permanent exclusions of children in public care is below the national level and those of similar authorities.

172. The council recognises that reducing the number of changes in care arrangements is a key factor in raising the attainment of children in public care. An early best value review led to relatively recent changes in management arrangements, including a much needed development officer and a designated teacher for each district. These teachers track pupil progress, target support at critical points in a child's education and support action to meet targets in personal education plans. The development officer, who is a key point of contact for the designated teachers, has links with operational teams and with senior planners in social services. Joint training has been generally well received by schools. Despite this, communication between social services and schools remains a subject of concern.

173. The joint officer steering group monitors the implementation of policy and a lead member's advisory group ensures accountability. However, there are notable gaps in current policy and practice. There is no joint strategic statement setting out shared priorities nor a set of standards and protocols that explain what each

department is working towards, either at key milestones in a child's life or when access to educational provision is at risk of disruption.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for children in public care:

- work with the social services department to:-
 - develop and implement a joint strategy to improve learning outcomes of children in public care;
 - develop a joint protocol setting out action both departments will take in the event of circumstances likely to impact adversely on a child's learning and achievement.
- ensure that the LEA's designated teachers have direct and easy access to the joint database.

Measures to combat racism

174. The LEA's support for combating racism is satisfactory and has shown steady improvement. The LEA, together with schools, is establishing effective strategies to prevent and address racism and has created a process for recording racist incidents. Schools welcome the council's new racial harassment policy and the revisions to its anti-bullying policy which are intended to improve further the guidance on responding to racist incidents. District inspectors routinely monitor issues of concern in schools and schools value the advice of the senior inspector for minority ethnic achievement.

175. The council and the LEA responded positively to the recommendations of the committee of enquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. An 'equalities audit' was established to evaluate the impact of policies across departments, leading to directorate action plans that are subject to rigorous monitoring. In April 2001, the LEA hosted a conference for schools, other council and public services, and local businesses to launch the Commission for Racial Equality's 'Learning for all: standards for racial equality in school'.

176. Schools have welcomed the introduction of straightforward procedures, and the clarification of appropriate criteria, for reporting racist incidents. Information from these reports is collated and monitored by the LEA and it has been presented to a multi-disciplinary group led by the police and to the lead member's multi-cultural advisory body.

177. There has been a council tradition, with cross party political support, of giving priority to equal opportunities in the workplace. For example, through the use of Single Regeneration Budget 2 funds, it has supported events designed to raise achievement, broaden the curriculum and take account of the traditions of cultural and faith groups. It issued self-evaluation guidance on equal opportunities to schools

in 1998. The Burton Racial Equality Forum has countywide coverage and has valued the support the authority has given to its work on equal opportunities.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues

178. The inspection of 1996 judged corporate planning to be less than satisfactory. The clarity and coherence of corporate plans is now providing a sound framework for education in Staffordshire, and the procedures for implementing and evaluating the impact of those plans are now satisfactory. A coherent system to link strategic planning and budget processes is developing. The hallmark of Staffordshire is evolutionary change, with an emphasis on the establishment of a consensus with schools and other partners. Progress has been sufficient and only occasionally, for example with regard to special educational needs, has this approach led to serious delays in recognising when the moment for firm and radical action is needed.

Corporate planning

179. The Best Value Performance Plan is the major corporate planning document. It identifies working 'with partners to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the people of Staffordshire' as the overall purpose of the council and gives an appropriately high priority to education. There are seven policy themes supported by a series of objectives.

180. The main focus for the education department is the 'learning society' theme. The objectives relevant to this theme are aspirational rather than strategic. However, they are reflected in the education service plan and translated into ten key practical priorities which guide action and against which progress can be evaluated effectively. These priorities include the implementation of major plans such as the Education Development Plan and the Lifelong Learning Plan. The evaluation of the Education Development Plan has been thorough and has made significant contributions to both the content and structure of its successor and to the draft of the next service plan. The education service plan also shows where the department and schools are able to contribute to the achievement of objectives within other policy themes.

181. The council has identified a timetable for the development of the community plan which is intended to be the foundation for 2002-3 Best Value Performance Plan. Furthermore, it is intended to link with a proposed public service agreement focusing on social inclusion through the targeting of resources on identified under-performing schools and under-achieving groups of pupils.

Decision making

182. Corporate decision making procedures, including those relating to finance, are satisfactory. The procedures have been evaluated and significant changes made as part of the preparations for best value. Decisions related to education are generally well informed and made in a reasonable and timely manner. They are based on wide and open consultation, although on financial matters the focus tends to be on obtaining support for LEA proposals. The lead member is involved at an early stage.

Officers provide relevant advice, including clear and well-informed options for action. The important exception to this is in the area of special educational needs.

183. The structure of responsibilities within the education department is clear and there is an effective scheme of delegation to officers. This has been improved by the development of performance management so that there is also a clear routine for day-to-day decision making.

Leadership of officers and elected members

184. The quality of leadership given by elected members is highly satisfactory. The lead member for education works closely with the director of education and is further informed by advisory bodies which offer advice on inspection, multicultural issues, governors and schools' safety. The education scrutiny committee fulfils its key roles effectively in relation to consultation and policy development prior to decisions being made, for example in relation to the next Education Development Plan. However, to date, it has not initiated the scrutiny of any decision made by the executive or service leader. The council provides effective support for the work of its scrutiny committees.

185. The quality of leadership given by senior officers of the LEA is good. The senior management team has been in place since January 2001 and is respected and trusted by schools. It has a secure understanding of and commitment to school improvement which is shared by the service managers.

186. Members, officers and schools recognise that the director has identified the issues facing the LEA. They support her determination to come to grips with weaknesses in the strategy for special educational needs. There has been extensive consultation about a clear and inclusive vision for the department and its services. Members have backed, corporately and financially, solutions to problems once they have been presented with them. At the time of the inspection, proposals for improvements in special educational needs had not been published.

187. There is good consultation and communication between the LEA and its schools with regular opportunities for headteachers, teacher associations and governors to meet purposefully with officers and members. Since taking up post, the director has deliberately been very accessible to schools and stakeholders during the consultation over the new vision for the LEA.

Partnership

188. The LEA works effectively with, and has the confidence of, a range of partners in promoting school improvement and high standards of education. These partners are well represented on the local strategic partnership known as the Staffordshire Conference which is working to produce the community plan.

189. There are examples of co-ordinated action with social services but communication about children in public care and child protection is unsatisfactory. Despite goodwill on all sides there is a lack of clarity about powers and duties.

190. There is effective liaison with the police. Relationships with the health services are improving and there are plans to improve the speed with which advice from health is received during the statutory assessment of pupils with special educational needs.

191. The LEA makes an effective contribution to local learning partnerships in particular the development of the Connexions network and liaison with the learning and skills council and the education business partnership.

192. There is good co-operation between the LEA and the local dioceses, for example, in relation to the standing advisory council for religious education (SACRE) and the joint working party on schools causing concern.

193. Elected members and senior officers have been very supportive of the work of parents' groups. Representatives of these groups feel well informed and actively involved in relevant consultations.

194. Initially, the LEA experienced some difficulties in establishing an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. All relevant interest groups are now represented and the partnership's plans meet requirements. However, members of the partnership do not yet have a strong culture of working together to develop and expand early years' education and childcare.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has made a number of fundamental recommendations, which are key to the further progress of the LEA. Work should begin on them immediately. They are:

In order to improve the effectiveness of the strategy for special educational needs:

- produce, as a matter of urgency, a strategic plan which sets out the vision for the future, identifies objectives, establishes a timetable for implementation, and includes a budget.

In order to meet statutory obligations with regard to special educational needs:

- produce a higher proportion of statements within 18 weeks; and
- ensure statements are reviewed annually and that required amendments are completed within the statutory timescale.

In order to improve value for money in special educational needs:

- establish, as a matter of urgency, clear criteria for the allocation of special educational needs resources to schools and a system to monitor their use and effectiveness; and
- make explicit to schools their responsibilities in respect of special educational needs.

In order to support school improvement in the area of special educational needs:

- ensure the appropriate involvement of schools in assessment panels and establish a moderation process;
- allocate money to schools according to need; and
- shift the emphasis of support services work in schools to prevention, early intervention and capacity building.

In order to improve support for children in public care:

- work with the social services department to:-
 - develop and implement a joint strategy to improve learning outcomes of children in public care;
 - develop a joint protocol setting out action both departments will take in the event of circumstances likely to impact adversely on a child's learning and achievement.

- ensure that the LEA's designated teachers have direct and easy access to the joint database.

In order to improve the supply of school places, as part of the school organisation plan:

- analyse the supply of, and demand for, school places at county and district level; and
- reduce overcrowding in secondary schools and primary school surplus places.

The report also makes the following recommendations. They are:

In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:

- establish a protocol with schools for the effective management of school balances.

In order to improve the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use of performance data:

- send records of visit directly to governors;

In order to improve support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children:

- extend work on the root causes of underachievement of pupils of Pakistani heritage and take corresponding action; and
- undertake regular analysis of the achievement of Traveller pupils facilitated by closer monitoring of outcomes relating to the work of the West Midlands Consortium Education Services for Traveller Children.

In order to improve support to schools for gifted and talented pupils:

- introduce a target-setting process for gifted and talented pupils.

In order to improve support to school management:

- increase the Best value element in management training for headteachers and governors.

In order to improve asset management planning:

- assemble accurate premises data as a basis for reaching an understanding with schools on priorities for buildings investment.

In order to improve property services:

- organise and explain the services so that schools are clear where responsibilities lie.

APPENDIX 2

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF THE QUALITY LEARNING SERVICE

1. The LEA chose wisely in selecting the quality learning service for review in the autumn of 2000. At the time it embraced the whole of the school improvement services and its aims were closely tied to both corporate and departmental priorities. Furthermore, the majority of recommendations in the last LEA inspection related directly to the work of this service.

2. The level of challenge was adequate. The review considered the effectiveness of the service's organisation and methodology in relation to the education development plan priorities, national initiatives for raising standards and inclusive education. It concluded that, while in most respects the service was successful, there should be improvements in the structure of the education development plan, the data for deriving performance targets and indicators, and the clarity of the roles of district teams and criteria for targeted support.

3. The review attempted to evaluate the costs of the service in the light of school performance. A comprehensive and informative analysis of the performance of pupils and schools demonstrates that targets set for school improvement were being met. However, the attempt to analyse comparative financial information was constrained by difficulties in disaggregating the costs of the diverse functions. The report came to no firm conclusions about value for money.

4. A comprehensive programme of consultation with stakeholders through surveys and discussions added important information and in some cases questioned the LEA's own evaluation. Responses were largely favourable but from among a variety of minor issues emerged the need to improve communication and some aspects of the quality and organisation of the professional development programme.

5. The competition element of this review was weak. The report confirmed that private sector providers were available, but stated that the organisation of the service would make it difficult to decide which elements to put out to tender and emphasised the LEA's statutory duty to monitor. No far-reaching alternatives for contracting out were considered. Nevertheless, the conclusions that delegation would increase choice and that the brokering function could be strengthened were valid. There was no attempt to evaluate the cost effectiveness or the potential for service improvement which might result from engagement with the private sector.

6. The review was a reasonably rigorous exercise in self-evaluation. It skilfully drew out the need for radical improvements in structures and delivery. The result was an improvement plan which was integral to other LEA strategies and plans, such as the education development plan and service plans. It has driven the necessary changes within suitably ambitious time-scales and the majority of actions have been implemented successfully.

7. This is a **good** service, highly regarded by schools. There are **promising** prospects for further improvement.

APPENDIX 3

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF ADMISSIONS, HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT AND STUDENT SUPPORT

1. Admissions, home to school transport and student support services (covering the assessment of applications for student loans, mandatory awards, discretionary and school maintenance grants) are delivered through two teams (pupil support and student support) based in the research and development business unit.
2. The aims of the two teams are aligned to statutory responsibilities and to council policy. The teams were able to demonstrate that these aims had been met. High levels of school and parental satisfaction with the current arrangements for admissions, transport and support services were confirmed by appropriate consultation which extended to parents, pupils, schools and universities. The consultation did not extend to higher education students. This is unsatisfactory.
3. The scope of the review was too narrow. It excluded any evaluation of the school prospectus service and did not consider whether this should continue to be provided. It also excluded consideration of discretionary awards for post 16 students and the opportunity to review the impact of the authority's policies and practices on participation rates in higher and further education.
4. All three services had difficulty in finding standard information to benchmark with LEAs and other providers. Consequently, comparison with the practices and performance of other LEAs and providers was unsatisfactory. Subsequent to the review, the pupil support unit has recently commissioned work to provide more information on transport costs. Furthermore, the review did not fundamentally challenge the way the services were delivered and was unsatisfactory in that no alternative options for the performance of the functions were considered.
5. The review correctly identified the provision of transport for pupils with special educational needs and route reviews as key areas for further work. However, although the timing of route reviews has improved, progress on monitoring increased expenditure on SEN transport has been slow. Similarly, the LEA identified a need to improve the quality of journeys, but there has been limited progress, other than the introduction of a penalty points system for contractors. Impact on users of the services has not been evaluated to date and no further consultation has taken place with parents and pupils.
6. Clear progress has been made by all three services in strengthened performance management systems and service specifications. The Student Support Service has made the most progress in moving towards e-government targets and the development of its website. In addition, it has now developed regular consultation mechanisms with students.
7. These services are **satisfactory**, with no significant weaknesses. The Best Value review has enabled these well-regarded services to move forward with a greater degree of understanding of the principles of best value, but the aims of the review were not sufficiently ambitious and no significant improvement for service users has arisen specifically from this process. The improvement plan, which

focused mainly on home to school transport, has not been fully implemented. Prospects for improvement as a result of the review are **uncertain**.

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